



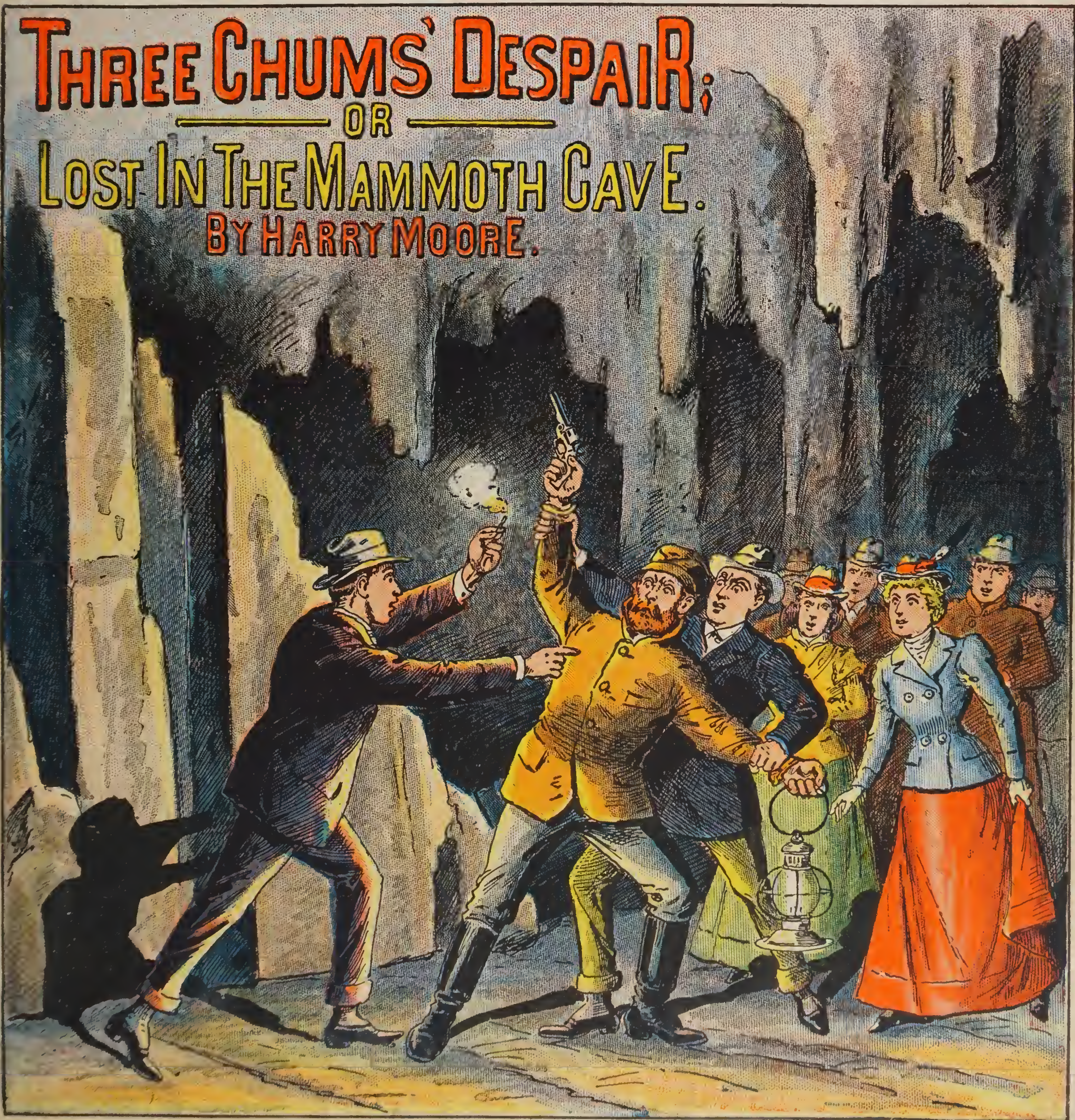
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No. 14.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 9, 1900.

Price 5 Cents.

THREE CHUMS' DESPAIR; OR LOST IN THE MAMMOTH CAVE. BY HARRY MOORE.



Tom True struck a match. "He is trying to get away and leave us here!" he cried. Instantly the pseudo guide drew a revolver, but quick as a flash Ben Bright seized the fellow's arms. "Not so fast, you scoundrel!" he cried.

THREE CHUMS.

A Weekly Story of the Adventures of Two Boys and a Girl.

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THREE CHUMS' DESPAIR

OR,

LOST IN THE MAMMOTH CAVE.

BY HARRY MOORE.

— From —
HAROLD J. GIESE
3422 North Robey Street
Chicago, Illinois

CHAPTER I.

DOROTHY HEARS SOMETHING.

"Oh, Ben!"

"What now, Dorothy?"

"What is this I hear the boys saying about your having been captured by moonshiners?"

"Indeed I cannot say what you have heard them saying, Dorothy. Have they been saying anything of the kind?"

"I heard Little Punn saying something to Blues Brown just a few moments ago, and when I asked him what he meant, and when had you been captured, he was all confused, and would not explain."

Ben Bright and Dorothy Dare were seated in the parlor of the hotel at Glencoe, Kentucky, Ben's "Three Chums" Company having given a performance at that place the evening before. Ben Bright had been suspected of being a government spy, and had been captured by moonshiners, two nights before, and Ben had asked the members of his company to say nothing about it to Dorothy or Mamie, but Dorothy had overheard Little Punn talking, and was suspicious, so Ben decided that he might as well tell his chum about it, as to have her anxious and worried, and thinking it worse than it really had been. He and Dorothy and Tom were three chums, anyway, were "all for one, and one for all," and the girl had a right to know.

Ben was sitting beside Dorothy on the sofa, and, taking the girl's hand in his, he said:

"I will tell you all about it, little chum. I did not intend that you should know, as I thought it would worry you for no good, and make you anxious regarding my safety while we were in this part of the country, but now that you have gotten an inkling of the fact, I will tell you."

"Oh, do so, Ben!" the girl said. "You should not have kept it from me at all, Ben."

"Perhaps not, still I was afraid it would make you so nervous you could not play, and so I made the boys promise not to tell."

"And, oh, Ben! Were you captured by moonshiners?"

"I was, Dorothy."

"When, Ben?"

"Night before last."

"After you went back to the theatre to work?"

"Yes, Dorothy."

The girl looked at Ben in puzzled astonishment.

"But I do not understand," she said. "How could they have captured you? Were not all the members of the company with you?"

"They were, Dorothy. I'll tell you how it was."

"Go on, Ben."

"It was this way: You know, we went back to finish up the work of getting the scenery in place, after supper, as we had been unable to finish it before."

"I remember. I did not wish you to do so, Ben. You remember, I asked you to put it off till next day?"

Ben smiled and pressed the girl's hand gently.

"I remember, little chum," he assented; "I remember only too well. And I have not forgotten how I wished that same night that I had done as you wished me to do. Next time I will mind you, Dorothy, and if I show any disposition to not do so, you must slap me and make me mind you!"

The girl laughed.

"I will do that very thing," she said. "I felt that something was going to happen to you if you went back to work. I don't know why, I can't explain it. I simply had a foreboding that in going back to work you were going into danger."

"And I was, Dorothy, as you shall see."

"Tell me about it, Ben."

"Very well. As I was saying, Dorothy, we all went back to the theatre, and worked for an hour or so, and finally got everything in shape. Then we started to come back to the hotel. There was one of the curtains that did not work just right, however, and as we were starting I turned back to try it again to see if I could not get it to work right before I left. I never like to give up, I always like to have my work thorough and satisfactory, and that refractory curtain bothered me."

"I will warrant you it did."

"Yes, and I leaped back up onto the stage and began working at the curtain, while the rest went on out of the room and downstairs. I was bound to give it one more trial."

"Yes?"

"Well, I worked away for a few minutes, and the boys called to me to come on, but I was bound not to give up, and kept at it, and finally I got it to working all right. Satisfied, now, I leaped down off the stage and started for the door, when suddenly three men rushed forward, coming so quickly I could hardly see where they came from, and hurled themselves upon me."

"Oh, Ben!" and involuntarily the beautiful girl drew closer to the youth as if to shield him with her frail form, and clutched his hand with nervous fingers.

"One of the men succeeded in getting me by the throat, and he choked me so that I could not cry out to warn the boys downstairs of my danger, and as they were three to one, and were all strong, powerful men, they soon overcame and made a prisoner of me."

"How—how terrible, Ben! To think that they would dare to come right into the theatre and do this! They must be desperate and dangerous men, Ben!"

"They were and are desperate men, Dorothy. I have never given the matter of this moonshiner business much thought, but I know something about it now, and about the men who are engaged in the manufacture of illicit whisky. They are indeed dangerous and desperate men."

"They must be, Ben."

"They tied my hands behind my back," continued Ben; "and then they carried me out through a back doorway—that was the way they came into the building—and down a back stairway to where four horses were tied, and they placed me on one horse, mounted the other three, and rode away with me a prisoner in their midst."

"And all this time Tom, Spalding, Markham and the rest were standing down on the sidewalk in front, not a hundred feet from where you were captured! Indeed, Ben, but it was a bold undertaking on the part of those men, and proves that they are desperate and dangerous men."

"Yes, and it was the very boldness of the thing that made it a success."

"Undoubtedly. And where did they take you to, Ben?"

"To their headquarters up in the hills. It must be some seven or eight miles to the place from here, I should judge."

"And what kind of a place was it, Ben?"

"It is a little valley of about twenty acres in extent, Dorothy. There are several log houses there, in which the moonshiners live, but I was taken into the house of the moonshiner chief, and through the house into the room where the whisky is made, this room being a cave in the face of the steep hill."

"And you were right in the place where the liquor is made?"

"Yes. All the members of the band gathered there soon after I was taken there, and they voted on whether or not to kill me."

"How terrible!" shuddered Dorothy. "And to think that I was sitting here at that time, waiting for you to return from the theatre, and utterly unconscious of your terrible danger!"

"You could have done nothing to aid me if you had known, little chum, and you would have been frightened and worried, so it was better as it was."

"Perhaps so; still if you are in danger, Ben, I would rather know it, as then I might do something to help you. But you say they voted on whether or not they should kill you. What was the result of the vote, Ben?"

"It was unanimous to put me to death, Dorothy."

"Oh, Ben!" Again the beautiful girl drew closer to the youth, and pressed his hand with convulsive fingers. "And they condemned you to death! How terrible!"

"I felt pretty blue, Dorothy, but I finally prevailed upon them to not kill me at once, but to wait two days to give time for some government spies to get here that the moonshiner chief was looking for, having read in a paper that spies were headed for this district. That was what made him think I was a spy, and they granted me the respite, and if the real spies put in an appearance within that time, they probably would not have killed me, after all."

Dorothy started.

"Did you notice four strangers at a table at one side of the dining-room, this morning, Ben?" asked Dorothy. "I am confident I heard them talking something about moonshiners. Perhaps they are the spies the paper told about."

"I noticed them," assented Ben. "It is not improbable that they are the fellows. Well, I wish they had got here before we did. It might have saved me an unpleasant experience."

"Yes, indeed, Ben. But you haven't told me yet how you escaped from the moonshiners' den."

"So I haven't. Well, it was this way: After it was decided to grant me a respite of two days, I was placed in a small room adjoining the still-room, and the men then left the place, leaving me alone. As I was tired and sleepy, I lay down on a cot that was there, and dropped asleep. I could not have been asleep long, when I was awakened by the entrance of some one, and I sat up, to see——"

"Who, Ben?"

"A young and beautiful girl, Dorothy."

Dorothy gave a quick start, and looked at Ben in surprise and wonder.

"A—a young and beautiful girl, Ben!" she cried, a slight tremor in her voice. "Who was she, Ben, and what was she doing there?"

"She was, I learned, little chum, the daughter of the moonshiner chief. Her name was Millie Sharp, she said, so her father's name is Sharp."

"Millie—a pretty name," murmured Dorothy. "And did she set you free, Ben?"

"She did, Dorothy."

"Then," said the girl, earnestly, "I say 'God bless Millie Sharp!'"

"And I say the same, Dorothy!"

If upon the first instant of learning that a young and beautiful girl had set Ben free a feeling akin to jealousy took possession of Dorothy, she as quickly dismissed it, and promptly said, "God bless Millie Sharp!"

"But how did she get you out of that place without your being seen, Ben?" the girl asked. "And did she not risk a good deal to do this for you?"

"I asked her if that was not the case," said Ben, "and

she replied that, while her father would be very angry if he learned that she had helped me to escape, he would not hurt her, as he loved her dearly."

"I am glad to hear that!" said Dorothy. "So good a girl should not have had to suffer for her kindly act."

"We had no difficulty in getting out of the cave, and out of her father's house," went on Ben, "but when we had mounted two horses which she had provided——"

"She—she went with you, Ben?"

"Only a little ways, Dorothy. She said I would lose valuable time trying to find my way out of the valley alone, and she went with me to show me the way."

"Oh, yes. Go on, Ben."

"Well, we had gotten about halfway through a narrow defile, which had to be passed through to reach the road, when we met a band of horsemen. They were moonshiners returning to headquarters, and they saw us before we could turn around and retreat, and, acting on the advice of Millie, I leaped off the horse and took to the brush afoot. I climbed the steep side of the defile, some of the moonshiners dismounting and following me, and then began a race, and a terrible race it was, for the men were hardy mountaineers, used to the ground, and it was all I could do to hold my own, much less pull away from them."

"It must have been terribly trying, Ben."

"It was, and to make it worse, the fellows who had been left behind sent some bloodhounds on my track."

"Oh, Ben!" shuddered Dorothy.

"The dogs could run faster than I could, and finally forced me to take refuge in a tree. I had a very narrow escape, too; I just did manage to get into the treetop in time, and that is all."

"Goodness! How terrible!" palpitated Dorothy.

"Meantime the boys had discovered that I had been captured—a negro had seen the men make me a prisoner and carry me off, and told them—and they got horses at a livery stable, and had been searching for me several hours, and as luck would have it they were right at the spot where I took to the tree, and saw it all."

"How fortunate!" breathed the girl.

"It was fortunate, indeed. Well, they rode under the tree, frightening the dogs away, and I got on the horse Tom was riding, sitting behind him, and rode to town in that manner."

"The men who were pursuing you afoot did not get there in time to make an effort to recapture you, then?"

"They got there, but there were so many of us, they were afraid to try to do anything, and we rode off and left them."

"And you owe your escape and probably your life to Millie Sharp, Ben?"

"I do, Dorothy."

"Oh, how I would like to see her and thank her for her noble act!" said Dorothy, earnestly. "God bless her!"

"And I, too, say 'God bless her,' Dorothy!"

CHAPTER II.

BEN'S COMPANY DECIDES TO VISIT THE MAMMOTH CAVE.

"Where do we play next, Mr. Bright?"

"I do not know, Mr. Hinkle."

"You do not know? Then this is as far as you had the route laid out?"

"Yes; but I think we shall go next to some town in Arkansas."

"In Arkansas, eh?"

"Yes, into the backwoods. I have a curiosity to see how the people look, live and act there, and I wrote to Fern, my advance agent, yesterday, telling him to go down into Arkansas and bill us for a town in the heart of the backwoods, and then wire us at once the name of the town."

"And we will remain here until we hear from him?"

"Yes."

"Phew!" the stage manager whistled. "Rather a dull place to have to spend several days in, is it not?"

"Oh, I don't know," smiled Ben. "I have not found it dull. It has been quite as lively as I liked since we have been here."

The stage manager smiled.

"That is true," he said. "But aren't you afraid that, if you remain here, those fellows may try to gobble you again?"

Ben Bright shook his head.

"No, I am not in the least afraid of that," he said. "I have no fears of their attempting the trick a second time."

"I am not sure about that, Ben," said Dorothy, a troubled look on her face. "You must be careful, and not go anywhere alone while we remain here."

"I shall be careful," Ben declared. "I will not go out unless some of the boys are along, though I am not at all afraid of a second attempt being made to capture me."

"I wish they would capture me and take me up to their headquarters," said Little Punn, gravely.

"So do I!" declared Blues Brown, fervently. "But that is too good luck to expect. They wouldn't waste their time with a little half-size like you."

"Why do you wish that, Punny?" asked Rhyme, whose curiosity was aroused. "Is it possible that your heart really is in the right place, and that you are willing to offer yourself up a sacrifice in Ben's place?"

"Sacrifice, nothing!" exclaimed Brown, contemptuously. "What, Punny offer himself up as a sacrifice? I guess not. There's some ulterior motive back of all this."

"It is false!" cried Little Punn. "I never wore an ulster in my life. There is no such purpose back of it."

"I never said anything about an ulster," growled Brown. "But why do you wish them to capture you, Punny?"

"So as to get a chance to make a mash on that beautiful girl Ben says is there," was the reply. "Oh, girls, girls, girls! How I love the girls, and what would we do without the girls? Say, Ben, was she really beautiful?"

Ben could hardly keep from smiling at the little fellow, but answered, earnestly:

"Yes, she was beautiful, Punny. Very beautiful, indeed. In fact, I have never seen more than two or three girls in all my life whom I thought more beautiful."

"Oh, Great Governor! I've a good mind to go down and stand around on the street and proclaim myself a spy in loud tones, until some of those fellows gobble me and take me to the moonshiners' headquarters! Oh, why could they not have suspected me instead of Ben in the first place!"

"I wish they had!" muttered Brown. "We would never have bothered to go after you, Punny, and we should have been well rid of you."

"Oh, I would never expect anything of you, Brownie," said Little Punn. "You never give anybody much thought—that is, nobody excepting yourself. You are always thinking about yourself."

"Stop your quarreling," said Spalding. "To my way of thinking, we should be better off if we were to lose both you fellows in the shuffle, somewhere; though there is no danger of that. The bad pennies, you know, always return."

"And you really think Brownie and I are no good?" asked Little Punn.

"That is what I think."

"And that is gratitude!" howled Little Punn. "What would have become of you, yesterday, when those men jumped onto us on the street, if I hadn't run back to the theatre and told Ben and the rest about it? Why, those fellows would have pounded you and the rest of the boys to death!"

"Well, I will acknowledge that that was one time when you were of some use in the world, Punny," said Spalding.

"He was glad of the chance to run," growled Brown. "That was just what he wanted to do, and here he is try-

ing to claim credit for doing it! That's just like your nerve."

"Bah! You're just sore because I got the start of you," said Little Punn. "You were just going to run yourself, and you had no excuse to do so after I had gone."

"I didn't think of it as soon as you did, Punny, which is proof positive that I was not so eager to run as you were."

"No, it is only proof that you were so badly frightened that you couldn't think much of anything!"

"Oh, Ben!" exclaimed Dorothy; "is this something else that you haven't let us girls know?"

"Oh, it didn't amount to enough to mention," Ben replied. "Some men attacked some of the boys who had gone out for a walk about town, and the rest of us went and helped them out. It did not take us long to put the men to flight after our whole force was on the ground."

"And do you think they were moonshiners, Ben?"

"It would not surprise me to learn that they were moonshiners."

"Well, it looks to me," remarked Mamie Blair, "as if you had had quite enough adventures here so that you would be wanting to get away from the place."

"Oh, we like to have things lively," smiled Ben.

"But not too lively," supplemented Blues Brown.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Little Punn. "Things were too lively to suit you yesterday, eh, Brownie? You can't get over it! Ha-ha-ha!"

"Let's see," said Hinkle. "How long will it be before we hear from Fern, likely?"

"I wrote to him yesterday," said Ben. "He will get the letter to-day. Then he will start at once for Arkansas, and will probably have reached there and selected a town for us to play in by day after to-morrow."

"And we will stay here until then?" asked Mamie. Ben nodded.

"Yes, there is no use of going anywhere else. We can live as cheaply here as anywhere."

"So we can, but it is dreadfully dull," sighed Mamie, who was of a lively disposition, and liked to be where she could see lots of people.

"Oh, you could stand it, I guess," smiled Ben; "but it won't be necessary. I have something in view which will, I think, meet with the approval of all, and cause you to vote your experiences in 'Old Kaintuck' very pleasing and agreeable after all."

"Then let us hear what it is you have in view, Ben!" cried Mamie.

"Yes, tell us, Ben."

"Tell us, quickly!"

"That's right. Don't keep us in suspense."

"No, I read of a man who was kept in suspense so long that he died," this of course being from Little Punn.

"I look for you to end your days that way, Punny," remarked Brown. "But let us hear what Ben has in view."

"It is something nice, I will wager," said Miss Small.

"You are right," assented Ben. "At any rate it seems to me that it would be nice to say that you had seen this wonderful thing of which I am going to speak."

"Oh, it's something to see, is it?"

"I was in hopes it would be something nice to eat!" murmured Little Punn in a voice of disappointment.

"What a little glutton you are, Punny! Always thinking of your stomach!" said Brown.

"Well, you know, Brownie, that self preservation is the first law of nature, and the best way I know of to preserve oneself is to eat plenty and often."

"Yes, it is something to see," replied Ben; "it is something to see, sure enough! In fact there is scarcely a greater natural wonder in the United States, if indeed in the world, than this I have in mind."

"But what is it, Ben?" cried Dorothy. "We are dying to know. Come, relieve our suspense, and satisfy our curiosity."

"Very well. I suppose it is hardly necessary to ask if there is one among you who has not heard of the Mammoth Cave?"

"The Mammoth Cave!"

"Oh! So that's it, is it?"

"Say, the Mammoth Cave is in Kentucky, isn't it!"

"Indeed it is," assented Ben, "and what is more, it is only about twenty miles from this place!"

"Great Scott!"

"Say, that would be something to see, wouldn't it!"

"It would that!"

"And it is within twenty miles of here, Ben?"

"It is."

"Oh, Ben, there is nothing in the world in the way of natural scenery or wonders that I would rather see than the Mammoth Cave!" said Dorothy.

"I shall be delighted to see it!" declared Mamie.

"I would like to see it," said Miss Small; "but I know that I shall be terribly frightened."

"Oh, there is nothing to be afraid of," said Ben. "There are competent guides at the cave, and they take a person clear through the cave, and show him all the natural curiosities for five dollars."

"That will make it cost considerable, Ben," said Tom True.

"It will cost us about fifteen dollars, as they take parties at greatly reduced rates per capita."

"Say, isn't that a sort of species of highway robbery, to force one to hire a guide, and pay him a big price to do a little or nothing?" asked Markham. "Why can't a fellow go in and look through on his own account?"

"Because the cave is private property. No one is allowed to enter the cave unless in the company of a guide, and after paying the customary fee."

"I should think it well enough, too," said Dorothy. "otherwise doubtless people would go in there, get lost and perish."

"There were a number of such occurrences before the present system of gates at the entrance and guides was adopted," said Ben.

"It is a very wise arrangement, even though it does cost something," said Hinkle. "I for one, however, would never risk going into the cave alone."

"Nor I."

"I would rather be excused."

"Same here!"

"Ditto me!"

"When will we go, Ben?" asked Dorothy.

"I think to-morrow would be a good time to go. We can get up early, and get there, explore the cave and get back here by evening."

"Say, Ben, do we go anywhere near the headquarters of the moonshiners in going there?" asked Little Punn.

"No closer than where we are now."

"Too bad! I'm not stuck on caves and such very much, and I thought that if we went near the moonshiners' stronghold, I would stop off and get captured."

"Still harping on the same old string," remarked Rhyme.

"Oh, he is always thinking of the girls," said Brown.

"But they don't think much of him!" said Spalding, dryly.

"That's all you know about it!" sneered Little Punn.

"Well, if we are going to go on that trip to-morrow," said Kerr, "we had better get the scenery down and packed to-day."

"That is right," said Ben. "We may wish to get out of here early, day after to-morrow."

"Come, Patsy," said Kerr, rising. "We will go and get to work at once."

"The rest of us will help you, Kerr," said Ben.

"I don't think it is necessary, Mr. Bright. It took lots of work to get the scenery up and in place, but it will not be so much work to get it down. It is easier to tear down than to build up, you know."

"Always," assented Ben. "And it applies to everything."

"You are right about that, Mr. Bright," said Hinkle.

"No doubt of it. One may spend a lifetime building up a reputation for honesty and honor, and then tear it down at a single stroke."

"I have seen cases of that kind," assented Hinkle.

"I know what Ben will do after he quits the road with the 'Three Chums' Company," said Little Punn.

"What?" asked several voices.

"Go on the road again as a lecturer. He could give the oldtime philosophers cards and spades, and then beat them without half trying."

"He could find material to work on right at hand," said Brown, dryly. "If ever there was a youngster who needed lecturing, it is a chap about your size."

"It wouldn't do you any hurt, either, old man," the little fellow retorted.

"I guess neither of you is particularly in need of a lecture," smiled Ben. "You are pretty good sort of boys."

"Of course, he had to include you in that, Brownie, for looks, and to keep from being accused of being partial!" said Little Punn, swelling up his chest.

"Oh, you go fall on yourself!" growled Brown.

"I'd rather fall on myself than have Spaldy fall on me," grinned the little chap. "It wouldn't hurt so bad."

"No, you're a sort of a lightweight all around."

"It is understood, then, that we are to visit the Mammoth Cave to-morrow," said Ben. "Everybody make up their mind, to-night, to get up early in the morning."

"We'll be up with the larks," said Little Punn, "that is, if they have any larks down in this country."

CHAPTER III.

BEN'S OLD ENEMY REAPPEARS.

Unknown to Ben Bright and his friends there were listeners to their conversation.

There was an early morning train that came through Glencoe, and on that train had come five youths who are well known to the readers of "Three Chums," viz., McMaster, Alford, Wheeler, Stamper and Wilson.

With the pertinacity of the bulldog McMaster was not willing to give up his long-cherished scheme of revenge on Ben Bright. In fact, the longer it went unfulfilled, the stronger grew his hatred of the brave youth who had deposed him from the position of "boss" of Raymond Academy, and the more desperate and determined to do the youth an injury McMaster became.

His last attempt at getting revenge on Ben, when he and his cronies had captured Ben and taken him down into an abandoned mine, had failed signally, and the five youths had fled from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, where this attempt to do Ben a serious injury was made, and Ben had hoped and trusted that he had seen the last of McMaster.

But even Ben, who was as a rule a good judge of human nature, had no real knowledge of the depth of the hatred which Frank McMaster felt for him; had he had this knowledge he would have expected nothing less than that the fellow would keep on dogging his footsteps, but as it was supposed of course that after his failure to seriously injure Ben at Pittsburg he would be content to stop and let the matter rest.

But McMaster was far from doing this, and, in company with his four worthy comrades, had come to Indianapolis, Indiana, where Ben's company had shown before coming to Glencoe, reaching that city just after Ben's company had left for Glencoe. They had remained a day and night in Indianapolis, and then had come on to Glencoe, arriving there early on this morning, as stated. They had gone to bed, but had risen at about eight o'clock, and were on their way down to the dining-room for a late breakfast, when as they reached the door of the parlor, they saw that Ben Bright and his entire company were in the room, holding some kind of a conference.

McMaster motioned his cronies back, and then standing just back of the doorjam, around which he peered, he watched and listened eagerly, thus seeing and hearing everything that was done and said, and a look of pleasure crept over his face as he listened.

Finally, when the conference between the members of Ben Bright's company had practically ended McMaster turned and stole back up the stairway and along the hall to his room, followed by his cronies, who had obeyed a signal from him to do so.

When they were in McMaster's room he turned to the youths, and with glowing eyes and an air of suppressed excitement McMaster said:

"Fellows, I've got a scheme!"

"Have you, old man?"

"Is it a good one, do you think?"

"Tell us what it is."

"Yes, let's hear it, McMaster."

McMaster took a turn or two up and down the room, and then he turned to his cronies again.

"Did you hear the conversation of Ben Bright and his friends in the parlor?" he asked.

"I heard most of it."

"So did I."

"I understood about all that was said."

"I got most all of it."

"You heard them talking, then, about going and visiting the Mammoth Cave to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"I did."

"Of course."

"We heard it, all right."

"Exactly," said McMaster, slowly and impressively, "well, that has given me an idea."

"Well, if you are going to tell us what the idea is, do it, and at once," said Alford, who had drunk more than was good for him the day before, and had a "head" on him this morning. "I want to get downstairs and get a drink."

"And I want some breakfast."

"So do I."

"Here, too. I'm as hungry as a bear."

McMaster frowned.

"Drink, nothing! Breakfast, bah!" he cried. "If you fellows felt like I do toward Ben Bright you would not think of eating or drinking when there was an opportunity in sight to do him up."

"Well, but we don't feel quite so strongly toward him as you do, McMaster," said Alford. "I don't like the fellow, I will frankly admit, but I don't hate him so poison bad that I am willing to go thirsty and hungry for the sake of doing him harm. I must have something to drink, Ben Bright or no Ben Bright."

"Here, too. Those are my sentiments," assented Wheeler.

"Give us your scheme, McMaster, and let us go to breakfast," said Stamper.

"That's right," from Wilson. "We're ready to listen."

"All right; I'll do so," said McMaster grimly. "I will say, though, that we will not dare go down to the dining-room now, anyway. Some of Ben Bright's fellows would likely see us, and then where would we be?"

"In the soup."

"Sure thing."

"That's no dream."

"That's right, especially if it was Tom True that saw us, he don't like us fellows a little bit, and he would go and swear out a warrant against you, McMaster, and have you arrested instantly."

"It would be just like him," assented McMaster. "He is just that kind of a chap. Ben Bright is soft, but Tom True isn't."

"But what about this eating business?" asked Wheeler. "Are we to have no breakfast? Must we starve, just because Ben Bright and his gang are here?"

"That is the question!" supplemented Wilson.

"The important question," from Stamper.

Alford said nothing. Evidently he was thinking more of something to drink than to eat.

"No, I'll tell you what we will do," said McMaster. "We will go down and slip out of the hotel at the side entrance, and go to a restaurant and get breakfast."

"That's the stuff!" said Wheeler. "Come on, let's go now. Can't you tell us your plan while we are eating, McMaster?"

McMaster hesitated. He was naturally of a cautious disposition, and averse to talking private business in public places, but his companions were so insistent and would be so impatient that he decided to humor them and risk it. He could be careful not to talk when a waiter was near the table.

"Oh, I guess it will be all right," he assented.

"What's the matter with putting on some false whiskers, and walking right down and out at the front door, after settling our bill here?" asked Wilson. "We will be sure to attract attention if we go to sneaking out at the side entrance."

"That's a good idea," assented McMaster. "I had forgotten about the disguises. The clerk who saw us last night will be in bed, so nothing will be thought of our whiskers."

The youths got out their grips, and opening them up, each drew forth disguises of various kinds, and selecting such as suited their fancy, the youths donned them, and were soon fairly well disguised. Then, taking their grips, the five went downstairs to the office and paid for their rooms. Then they walked out, the clerk asking them no questions, and seemingly not caring whether they had any breakfast or not. The probabilities are that he was glad to have them go thus, as, had he conducted them to the dining-room at that hour, he would have received a "blessing" from the kitchen and dining-room force that would have made his hair curl.

The youths made their way down the street to where a sign announced "Meals at All Hours," and entering, went to a table in one corner and seated themselves.

"Beefsteak and coffee for five," ordered McMaster, as the waiter approached, and the waiter went away to give the order.

"Now for your scheme," said Wilson.

"Yes, out with it, old man."

"We've had our way, now go ahead and have yours."

"Let's hear the scheme," said Alford, who, with the rest, had stopped in a saloon and got a couple of stiff drinks and was feeling much better. "Out with it, McMaster."

"All right, I'll do so. You know, they have decided to go to the Mammoth Cave, and go through it, to-morrow?"

"Yes, we heard them say so."

"Sure thing."

"Yes, the whole gang is going."

"Even to Denny and the Irishman."

"Yes. Well, I have made up my mind that we will go to the Mammoth Cave, too."

"What!"

"We are to go to the Mammoth Cave?"

"Surely you don't mean that we are to go into the thing?"

"I don't want any of it in mine, thanks."

"We will go to the Mammoth Cave, too," reiterated McMaster, "only, instead of waiting till to-morrow, we will go to-day."

"To-day!"

"We will go to-day?"

"What in blazes will we go for, old man?"

"That's the question. What are we to gain by doing this?"

"I'll tell you, fellows. You remember, Ben Bright said that there are guides at the cave, and that no one is allowed to enter except he is accompanied by a guide?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I too."

"So do I, but what of it?"

"Yes, where does that cut any particular ice?"

"I'll tell you. Those guides are men."

"We didn't suppose they were women," growled Alford.

"They are men," went on McMaster, frowning slightly, "and consequently they are human."

"That is obvious," grinned Wheeler. "They are undoubtedly human, and like many of us are likely very human."

"That is the point," said McMaster. "I am banking on finding that they are human enough to be willing to do what I wish them to do, providing I pay them for it."

"You don't mean that you are going to try to hire the guides to do Ben Bright's crowd harm, do you, McMaster?" asked Wilson. "Because if you do, I can tell you I don't think it will work."

The other three shook their heads.

"No, that cat won't fight, old man."

"You can't cut 'er."

"It won't pan, McMaster."

McMaster smiled grimly.

"That isn't just what I am figuring on doing," he said.

"What is your plan, then?"

"Yes, what are you figuring on?"

"What else could it be?"

"We're in the dark, old man. Enlighten us."

"I'll do so. My plan is to hire the guides to go off on a day's vacation."

"To what——"

"Hire 'em to go off on a day's vacation?"

"What do you mean?"

"What good would that do?"

"My plan is to hire them to go off on a day's vacation," McMaster repeated, deliberately, "and leave us to act as guides in their places!"

"Ah!"

"Oh!"

"I see!"

"So do I!"

McMaster looked from one to another with a smile of satisfaction and triumph on his face.

"Now you begin to tumble," he remarked.

"I have fallen clear over."

"Me too."

"I catch on, McMaster."

"I'm next, now, old man. But can it be worked?"

"That is the question, of course, and the main one," replied McMaster, "but I think it can be. I have plenty of money, and money will accomplish wonders, you know."

"So it will."

"Yes, we know that."

"Money is mightier than the sword."

"Money is mightier than the pen and the sword put together."

"There are men, of course, who cannot be bribed or bought, but they are not as plentiful as they might be, and I do not expect to find them acting as guides to people who wish to explore the Mammoth Cave."

"And if you can manage the guides, then what do you intend to do, McMaster?" asked Alford.

"To take their places, and act as guides to Ben Bright's party!"

"Ah, I see! But then, what?"

"Why, it is simple enough. I suppose that we disguise ourselves thoroughly, so they will not recognize us, take the places of the regular guides, guide the party into the cave, take them to about the farthest and most intricate portion of the cave, and then slip away and leave them in darkness and to their fate!"

McMaster's voice had grown fierce and jubilant as he talked, and when he had finished he glared at his companions with eyes which glowed with evil triumph.

"What do you think of that for a scheme of revenge, not only on Ben Bright, but on his cronies as well, fellows?"

"But—but mightn't they starve in there?" stammered Wilson.

"Undoubtedly," replied McMaster. "I am going to hire the guides to stay away three days and nights, so as to give them the chance."

The four cronies of McMaster stared at him aghast.

"But isn't that piling it on a little too thick, McMaster?" asked Wheeler. "We don't want to be the death of them!"

"I tell you I don't care if we are!" grated McMaster. "I've been trying to get square with Ben Bright for so long, and have failed so much that I am getting sick and tired, and I would just as lief wind it up for good and all, and be the death of the entire Ben Bright gang, bag and baggage, as not!"

There was no mistaking the deadly earnestness of the young fiend, and his cronies had been with him so long, and had become so imbued with his ideas and so influenced by his stronger personality, that they said no more in dissent.

"When will we start for the Mammoth Cave?" asked Alford.

"As soon as we can find horses to ride, after breakfast is over," McMaster replied.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DETECTIVES.

Ben Bright was at the theatre nearly the whole morning, helping Kerr and Patsy Dooley in getting the scenery down, but at a quarter to eleven he found that he would be needed no longer, and together with Tom True, Spalding, Markham and two or three more of the boys who had been at the theatre, loafing and watching the work, there being nothing else that they could do, he made his way to the hotel.

As they stepped up onto the porch, four men emerged through the doorway, and confronted Ben and his friends.

"It is the four men Dorothy spoke of as being in the dining-room this morning," thought Ben. "I will wager they are the spies Sharp was expecting when he captured me."

One of the men, who seemed to be the leader, stepped directly in front of Ben, and said, with somewhat of a peremptory air:

"One moment, young man, I wish to speak to you."

Although not liking the fellow's tone, Ben did not care to show resentment just then, so he paused and, looking the man squarely in the eyes, said, quietly:

"What is it you wish, young man?"

The man started and looked at Ben quickly. As he was

a man of about thirty-five, he was not exactly a young man, and he felt that the youth was coming back at him slightly. As he was likewise a man with a good opinion of his own importance, was indeed arrogant and overbearing, he did not fancy being spoken to in such fashion, and frowned deeply.

"I wish to ask you a few questions, sir!" was the reply, with an air of importance.

Ben looked the man and his companions over coolly and quietly.

"I acknowledge the right of no man to halt me and demand that I answer any questions he may choose to ask," replied Ben, coldly. "You are a stranger to me; I never saw you before, but if you choose, you may go ahead, and if your questions are such as I feel you are justified in asking, I will answer them, otherwise not. Go ahead."

"Oh, our young friend is quite an independent sort of a fellow, isn't he?" the stranger almost sneered.

"As you will find!" said Ben, icily, for he was rapidly taking a dislike to the man.

The man's lips curled in a sneer, and, stepping forward, he turned back the lapel of his coat and revealed to Ben's eyes the silver badge of a detective.

"Perhaps that will make you more willing to answer!" the fellow said, with a triumphant smile.

"You are mistaken," replied Ben, coolly. "That badge gives you no right to intimidate or browbeat respectable citizens. You have no more rights than I have, or than any other honest man has. You are merely a common man, until you come in contact with some one who has been breaking the law in some manner. Then of course you have powers that are not possessed by the ordinary individual. Go ahead with your questioning, however, and if I may answer your questions with credit and honor to myself, I will do so, otherwise, as I said in the beginning, not."

The detective, for such he was, as were his companions also, frowned. He did not relish the extremely cool and calm manner in which Ben greeted him. Still, his feeling of wrath, however, he said:

"Your name is Ben Bright?"

"It is," assented the youth.

"Ah! Exactly. I am glad you do not deny it!"

"There exists absolutely no reason why I should deny my own name, sir," said Ben, a hard glint coming into his fine gray eyes. "It is an honest and honorable name, and I am, I think, an honest and honorable man."

"Man?" sneeringly.

"You'll find he is a man, all right, any way you are a mind to make him!" cried Tom True, who was fairly boiling over with anger, at the insolence of the fellow. "What's

the matter with you, anyway? If you have anything to say, why don't you say it?"

The detective glared at Tom angrily.

"It's not your put in," he growled. "Wait till you're spoken to."

"We're chums," cried Tom, defiantly. "We're chums and the same as brothers, and the man who insults Ben Bright or jumps onto him insults and jumps onto me!"

"And me!"

"The same here!"

"You'd better be civil, my friend," said Spalding, slowly and ponderously, to accord with his giant form, "or you may get yourself into trouble, detectives or no detectives."

Ben motioned for his friends to be silent.

"Leave this matter to me, boys," he said. "I will attend to this fellow's case." Then, facing the man, and boring him through with that peculiar nailing look of his, that always came into his eyes when he was aroused, Ben said, sternly:

"You will please state your business, and do it quickly, and without any more insinuations or slurs. If you utter another remark that is insulting in either words or tone, I shall treat you as you deserve. Now go on."

The detective was plainly taken aback. The promptness with which Ben's friends had called him down, and the extremely cool manner in which Ben himself now addressed him, was a surprise to him, as he had imagined he could talk to the youths in about such manner as he pleased himself. Finding that this would not work, however, he changed his front somewhat, and in a more moderate tone said:

"Mr. Bright, I am, as I have shown you, a detective. So are my companions here. And we are more than mere detectives, we are spies and informers, in the employ of the government, and we have been sent down into this country to spy out the headquarters of a moonshiner gang which is operating largely somewhere in this part of the country."

Ben bowed, as the detective paused.

"Go on," he said, quietly.

"We arrived here last evening," the man continued, "and this morning we have been prosecuting inquiries around town, and at a livery stable down the street we heard a strange tale."

"Indeed?" remarked Ben. He knew what the detective was coming at, but would not let on.

"Yes, we were informed at this livery stable that you, Ben Bright, were suspected of being a spy by the moonshiners, and that night before last you were captured by some of them and taken to their headquarters, but that you later escaped, and with the aid of your friends here, who

went after you on horseback, succeeded in getting safely back to town. Is that the truth?"

Ben nodded gravely.

"It is," he replied.

The detective's eyes glistened eagerly at this, and he said:

"Good! You were taken to the headquarters of the moonshiner band, then?"

"I was."

"Good again! And their headquarters—about how far from here is it to the place?"

"I could only guess, sir."

"Well, how far do you guess it is?"

"Oh, I should say seven or eight miles."

"In which direction?"

"East."

"Up in the hills?"

"Up in the hills."

"And you know the way there?"

"I cannot say that I do," replied Ben, slowly.

"Why not? You were taken there, you admit."

"Yes, I admit that."

"Then how can you say you do not know the way there?"

"Because it is true."

The detective was puzzled, and it was evidently hard work for him to keep from saying something that would have brought about trouble between himself and Ben Bright upon the instant. Finally he said:

"Why is it that you do not know the way there? Was it so dark you could not see the way you went?"

"No, it was not a dark night, but my eyes were bandaged the last half of the journey."

"Oh!"

Strangely enough, the detective had not thought of this, but he had no cause to doubt Ben's word, for the reason that he realized that this was just what the moonshiners would naturally do.

He pondered for a few moments. Then he looked up, a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"But you got away," he said. "You certainly saw something of the lay of the land while you were making your escape."

"Yes," Ben assented, "that is true. But I did not come away over the regular route. I came over the hills and through the timber and brush, with half a dozen of the moonshiners after me, and later on a couple of bloodhounds in addition, and I did not keep my bearings very well. I doubt if I could find my way back to the headquarters of the moonshiners if I tried."

"Well," the detective said, with a complacent smile,

"you will get the chance to try, for I am going to ask you to guide us to the place."

"And I shall be forced to refuse to do so," replied Ben, quietly.

"What! Refuse to guide us? What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"You refuse to guide us?"

"I do."

The detective stared at Ben in amazement.

"But why?" he asked. "This is extraordinary."

"For the simple reason that I gave my word of honor not to do so."

"Gave your word not to do so? Whom to?"

"To a young lady—the daughter of the moonshiner chief. It was to her I owed my escape."

"Ah! The moonshiner chief's daughter, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she extracted a promise of this kind from you?"

"She did."

"But, my young friend, you must realize that a promise made under such conditions is not binding! You are under no obligations to keep your promise."

"To the contrary, I am, sir," said Ben, quietly. "The promise is just as binding as any promise that could possibly be made. The lady was risking her father's life and safety in releasing me, and she had a right to extract the promise from me, and I, having given the promise, have no right to go back on it—and indeed I have no desire or intention to do so."

The detective and his companions were evidently stumped. They had not expected anything of this kind. It was a new experience, and realizing that Ben was a determined character, they were puzzled to know how to act.

"My young friend, that is no way to look at this matter," the detective said. "These moonshiners are criminals, breaking the laws of the land they live in, and it is the duty of every patriotic citizen to do all he can to aid in breaking up this work. I trust that, on due reflection you will change your mind and decide to guide us to the hiding-place of the moonshiners."

Ben shook his head.

"I could not think of doing so," he said. "I would be false to the trust the young lady reposed in me, and I will have to refuse."

The detective frowned.

"But consider, my young friend," he said, in a stern tone, "You are in effect aiding and abetting these moonshiners if you refuse to do this. You are laying yourself liable to the law in acting in this manner, and if you per-

sist, and continue to refuse to aid me and help run these moonshiners to earth, I shall have you arrested."

"Have me arrested!" exclaimed Ben, in surprise. "You can do nothing of the kind. This is a free country, and if I do not choose to aid you, I do not have to do so."

"You will find you are mistaken, young man," the detective declared. "We are here to run those moonshiners to earth, and we are going to do it, and we do not propose to give up a single point in the game. We cannot afford to throw away a chance like this to get right into the stronghold the first thing."

"You will have to do so," said Ben, quietly but firmly. "I gave my word to that young lady that I would do nothing to in any way aid in running her father to earth, and I shall keep my word."

"You really mean that?" the detective asked, in a strained voice.

"I do."

"And you will not voluntarily change your mind, and decide to give us your assistance in this matter?"

"I will not!"

At this the detective's temper got the better of him, and he, to use a familiar phrase, "flew off the handle," became very angry.

"You young whelp!" he hissed, glaring at Ben. "It is my opinion that you are in cahoot with the moonshiners, and that your story of having been captured is all a bluff."

"You old whelp!" said Ben, coldly, "I do not think anything about it, but I know that you are a liar."

"Curse your impudence, take that!" the detective cried, and then he struck at Ben Bright's face with all his might.

CHAPTER V.

BEN AND A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE LAW CLASH.

Ben Bright was not taken off his guard, however. He saw that the detective was becoming very angry, and he knew what would be the result when he returned the epithet that had been applied to him, and was prepared for trouble. So he evaded the blow with ease, by leaping to one side, and then coolly and quietly he said:

"You forget yourself, sir. You are a detective, an officer of the law, and you should not so far lose sight of this fact as to attack one who is attending strictly to his business. I advise you to desist."

"Paste him, Ben!" grated Tom True. "Don't let the scoundrel strike at you and go unpunished."

The detective was too angry to listen to reason, however, and he struck at Ben again, who evaded the second blow.

"I have warned you, sir," he said, quietly. "I have spoken to you twice, and if you strike at me a third time, I shall defend myself."

"Defend yourself, you young whelp, if you want to!" the detective cried. "That's what I want you to do, and I will pound some sense into your head!"

"Knock his head off, Ben!" said Markham, his dark eyes flashing and his hands clenched. "Paste him for keeps, and if those other fellows try to interfere, we will attend to them!"

The detective struck at Ben again, and the youth, tired now of standing up to be a target for the fellow's blows, warded off the blow and struck out with his left, catching the detective on the chest, but so powerful was the stroke that the man was hurled back several feet. Then Ben sprang forward and took the offensive. He began raining the blows in upon the detective, and that worthy, although evidently knowing something of the art of self-defence, had all he could do to keep from being floored at once. As it was, it was plain that it was only a question of a few minutes' time before he would get what he so richly deserved, for Ben was forcing him here and there, much as he pleased.

A crowd quickly gathered, and many of them recognizing Ben, and some of them having witnessed him in a fight on the street two days before, when some of the boys had been attacked by moonshiners, they yelled for him and cheered him on.

"Go it, Ben Bright!"

"You're the boy that can do it, all right!"

"Paste him atween the eyes!"

"Make 'im see stars in ther daytime!"

And presently Ben obeyed the instructions of his admirers, for he got through the detective's guard and gave him a terrible blow fair between the eyes that knocked him down as if struck by a sledge-hammer.

Crack! went Ben's fist, and then kerthump! went the detective's body against the hard floor of the porch, and a shout of delight went up from the spectators—with the exception, of course, of the fallen man's three companions, who made a move toward Ben, but were warned back by Tom True, and promptly obeyed the warning.

"He brought it upon himself," said Tom, grimly. "Just stand back, now, and keep quiet, or it won't be good for you!"

"Wasn't that a dandy clip?"

"I'll bet he saw all kinds of stars."

"I'll bet there's a dent in that board where his head struck!"

"Yes, or a flat place on his head."

"More likely the latter. His head's too soft to make a dent in anything, unless it might be soft mud."

"His name is 'mud,' right now!"

"Get up, old man, and try et over ag'in!"

"Yes, don't let a little thing like that discourage you."

The detective did not intend to let it completely discourage him, evidently, for presently he scrambled to his feet, and with a roar of rage rushed upon Ben. He struck out wildly with both hands, and he was so furious with rage that he could hardly see. He was like a blind man, striking here, there and everywhere at random, and although it kept Ben pretty busy dodging, parrying and evading for a few moments, he was not in the least danger, and was only awaiting a favorable opportunity.

The opportunity came presently, when the detective had winded himself by his exertions, and then Ben struck out once, twice straight from the shoulder, and down went the fellow again with a crash, this time lying still for nearly half a minute.

"Phew!" whistled one fellow, "that was a soaker, sure enough!"

"Ez purty licks ez ever I seen in my life!"

"Ther kid is a terror, sure!"

"He's a bad one ter fool with!"

"I guess ther chap on the floor thinks so!"

"He don't seem ter be thinkin' much uv ennythin', jes' now."

"That's right, he's all but dead to the world."

"I'll bet he don't know whar he's at!"

The fallen man's companions made a move to go to his assistance, but Tom True sprang in front of them, his fist clenched, his eyes flashing.

"Just you wait!" he said. "Wait till your friend says he has enough. He brought this on himself, and you are not going to sneak him out of it, now that you see he is getting the worst of it. Stand back!"

"That's right!"

"You bet!"

"Sure thing!"

"That's what!"

"Yes, don't get frisky, my friends!"

And with these exclamations, Spalding, Markham and the rest leaped forward and took up their positions alongside of Tom True, and the three detectives were forced to stand back. They did not dare enter into a combat with the youths, for they knew they would get the worst of it.

This pleased the crowd standing around, the majority of the members of which were plainly and outspokenly in sympathy with Ben and his friends.

"Yes, just keep back, you fellers!"

"Thet's right!"

"Ye bet! No pilin' up, threer or four on one, here!"

"Ther other is man ag'in' man, an' nobuddy hez enny call ter interfere."

"Man ag'in' boy, ye hed better say."

"Thet's so, but ther boy is more uv a man than ther other wun."

"Thet's right. Now yer talkin'."

"Sure thing. He's a whole team and a dog under the wagon!"

Presently the detective struggled to a sitting posture and gazed about him wonderingly. He had been dazed by the blows Ben had given him, but this quickly wore off, and it all came back to him. And the sight of his opponent standing there, waiting with folded arms and calm countenance for him to get up, angered the man afresh and he got upon his feet as quickly as he could.

"Have you had enough?" asked Ben, who had no desire to pound the man all up, and thought that perhaps he would be willing, now, to quit.

"Have I got enough? No!" the fellow cried. "And you can't give me enough, either, you——"

Ben did not wait for the man to utter the epithet that was on his tongue, but leaped forward and dealt the speaker blow after blow, driving him steadily backward, and finally, getting a good opening, the youth sent in one of his terrible knockout blows, and down the detective went with a crash, and lay still.

Ben turned and motioned for his friends to step aside and let the fallen man's friends pass.

"You had better look after your friend," he said to the three. "He will come around all right, after awhile himself, but it would do no hurt to bathe his face with cold water."

One of the men ran into the hotel office and returned quickly with a glass of water. Then, wetting his handkerchief, he bathed the face of the unconscious man, while the other two rubbed his wrists, and presently the fellow opened his eyes, and stared first at one face, then another in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" he asked, in a weak voice. "What has happened?"

"You're still on earth, old man!" laughed a bystander.

"The house fell on you, old hoss!"

"It was an earthquake."

"You were struck by lightning!"

"Yes, an' et hit ye hard, too."

"Et's no lie about 'im bein' struck by lightnin', fur thet thar kid is shore ole lightnin', every time!"

Presently a remembrance of all came back to the man, and he rose to his feet, being aided by his companions. He was slightly weak in the legs, but soon became almost his former self again, but instead of renewing the fight with Ben, he addressed the youth threateningly.

"You shall pay dearly for this, young man!" he said. "I am going to have you arrested."

"But you began the trouble yourself," said Ben, quietly. "I have a dozen witnesses who can and will swear that you struck at me three times before I struck at you at all, and who heard me warn you twice to desist."

"Oh, that part I grant. I am not going to have you arrested for assault, but for refusing to render aid to an officer of the law when called upon." Then turning to the crowd, he asked:

"Will some one direct me to the office of the Police Judge?"

"It's four doors up the street," a man replied.

"Thank you," the detective said. "Come, we will go there at once, and swear out a warrant for this fellow's arrest. I'll show him whether he can defy the law!"

"I have no wish to defy the law," replied Ben, quietly. "I do not believe there is any law in the land that will compel me to do as you wish me to. I will go to the Police Judge's office with you, and we will see about it."

"You can come now or not, just as you like," the detective snarled, "but you can bet your life that you will come when I get my warrant. Resist me then, and I will kill you!"

"Oh, you cowardly scoundrel!" grated Tom True.

"I don't think you will get any warrant, however," said Ben, quietly.

"We will see about that!" and then the detective led the way to the office of the Police Judge and asked for a warrant, which was given him, and he filled it out.

"There, sign that, judge," he said. "Here is the young man, right here. He very obligingly came along."

The judge put on a pair of spectacles, and read the charge in the warrant, after which he looked Ben over with interest.

"So you are the young man who was captured and taken to the headquarters of the moonshiners, eh?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Ben.

"And yet, after having been captured and taken there, you refuse to guide this detective to the place?"

Ben bowed.

"I do," he said.

"But why do you do so?"

"It is very simple, sir. I gave my word of honor to the

moonshiner chief's daughter that I would not aid in any way in bringing about her father's capture."

"Ah! And why did you give this promise?"

"Because she set me free, sir, and conducted me from the place in safety. I owe my life to her, sir."

"Oh, that is it. And you gave her your word of honor that you would not use the knowledge you had gained to the disadvantage of her, if she set you free?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is unfortunate, since it is clearly your duty to do this thing to aid the officers of the law in any manner within your power. It is the duty of all good citizens, everywhere and always, to do that."

"I am aware of that, sir, but I wish to ask if I am bound to go with this man and lend him aid after he has assaulted me and tried to force me by personal violence to do what he wished?"

The judge looked from one to the other, and his keen eyes sized up both Ben and the detective. Presently he turned to Ben, and there was a sly twinkle in his eye as he said:

"It looks to me, young man, as if he was the one who had had been offered personal violence."

"He attacked me, and I but defended myself," said Ben, quietly. "He will not deny that himself."

The judge turned to the detective.

"Is this true?" he asked. "Did you try to take the law into your own hands and force the young man to go with you and do as you said?"

"He was insolent," the detective growled, "and I but tried to punish him for that."

"He was insolent—more, he was insulting, first," said Ben. "I have a dozen witnesses to that."

The judge frowned.

"I am astonished that you, a detective in the employ of the government, should so far forget yourself as to try to take the law into your own hands!" the judge said, severely. "You should have known better than to do that."

"I tell you I was only intending to punish him for insolence," the detective said. "I demand that you sign that warrant, and at once, sir!"

Now, the detective was talking to an old-fashioned Southern judge, a man of good education, and withal a man of good judgment and discrimination, and he did not like the style of the detective at all, and made up his mind to teach the fellow a lesson.

"Oh, you demand that I sign the warrant, do you?" he said, in a low but determined voice. "You seem to have a very high opinion of your powers. If you had come to me in the first place, I should have signed the warrant, as it is the duty of every citizen to lend assistance to the officers

of the law when called upon to do so, but you saw fit to try to take the law in your own hands, and I shall leave it that way. I shall refuse to sign this warrant, and the young man is free to go. You had no right to attack him, and I am glad to see that you got the worst of it. In conclusion I will say, that, having such confidence in your abilities, you should not call for help from outsiders. Go in and do the work yourself. Hunt the moonshiners down, and get the credit for the performance. That is all. Get out of the office, everybody, I am going to dinner!"

Then the crowd filed out, and at the door Tom True cried, "Three cheers for the judge!" which were given with a will, everybody, with the exception of the four detectives, of course, joining in.

CHAPTER VI.

MCMASTER WORKS HIS SCHEME.

When McMaster and his four cronies had finished eating breakfast, they paid the score, and, taking their grips, made their way out down the street to where a sign announced the presence of a livery barn.

Entering the barn, McMaster asked the man in charge if he could furnish them with a team and wagonette or surrey, and the man said he could. McMaster informed the man that the team would be needed a couple of days, and then, as he was a stranger, he had to deposit the estimated value of the rig as a guarantee that it would be brought back again.

"Get the team ready as quickly as possible," said McMaster. "We wish to be away at once."

"Will have it ready in ten minutes," was the reply, and the livery stable man went to work, harnessing the horses.

He was as good as his word, and ten minutes later the rig was ready. McMaster took the reins, and they were away.

McMaster did not wish any one in Glencoe to know that a party of five men had gone to the Mammoth Cave, so he had made no inquiries regarding the direction to take, but when they had left the town a mile behind he stopped at a farm house, and asked the man the road to the Mammoth Cave.

It happened that McMaster had taken the right direction, so he did not have to turn around and go back, for which he was thankful. McMaster drove rapidly, and at noon, when they stopped at a way-side house for dinner, he was told that it was only three miles further to the cave.

McMaster asked if there was any place nearer the cave where they could leave their team, and their grips, and on being informed that there was not he decided to leave them here and walk the rest of the distance, as they would not wish to leave the horses hitched in the vicinity of the cave the rest of the day, and all night and probably next day.

So McMaster hired a room, and, placing their grips in it, he locked the door and pocketed the key. Then, leaving the team behind, the five set out and walked to the cave, it taking them an hour to go the distance.

McMaster was in luck, for it happened that there were no visitors at the cave that day, and the two guides were engaged in the pleasant task of winning each other's wages at poker. When McMaster and his cronies appeared, the guides started to put the cards away, but McMaster said for them not to do so.

"We'll join you," he said suavely. "We wish to go through the cave, true, but we would rather rest awhile before starting, and we can rest and play at the same time."

The guides were willing.

"All right, gents," one said. "Sit down and take a hand. Thar's nobody barred here."

McMaster, Wheeler and Stamper sat down at the table, as seven would be too many to play, and they were the smoothest card sharps of the five, anyway, and McMaster had made up his mind to win the guides' money, after which, when they were without money, he felt that they would be more likely to listen to the proposition he intended making them favorably.

A small cottage had been built near the entrance to the cave, and the guides occupied this cottage, and that was where they were playing cards.

"What's the limit?" McMaster asked, as soon as he had become seated at the table.

"A dollar," was the reply. "We hain't no millynairs, mister. We air just playin' moderate like."

"Oh, that's all right," said McMaster. "I just wished to know before starting in, that is all. The limit is all right. I don't care about having the sky for a limit myself."

Then the game began, and proceeded with varying fortunes for an hour. It was evident that the two guides were playing as much together and against the strangers as they could, but if they had but known it, they were pitted against semi-professional gamblers, youths who were skilled in all the tricks of the craft, and McMaster especially was an expert at handling cards—could shuffle them so as to give himself or either of his companions a good hand, and could deal as he chose, holding back good cards for him-

self and giving the poorer ones to the other players. He had not played fifteen minutes before he had the high cards marked, and could tell when he was dealing these cards to any one else, and could hold them back for himself, or give them to Wheeler or Stamper, as the three were, of course, playing together, against the two guides.

After an hour's playing, the fortunes changed and settled down steadily to favor McMaster and his two cronies. McMaster had decided that it was time to go in and win the guides' money. And when he decided to do this, it was soon accomplished, as he and his two cronies were experts and did not scruple to employ the aid of gamblers' tricks to enable them to win, while the guides were guileless in this respect, and depending solely on the fickle goddess, Dame Fortune, were not in it at all, and half an hour later both were penniless. They had not a cent left.

"We're out uv et," one of the guides said, sulkily. "We hain't got no more money. I don't understan' et. I never hed sech blamed hard luck in all my life. I couldn't git no cards at all."

"Nur me, neether," the other said, gloomily. "Waal, we'll hev ter quit. We kain't play without money."

"Say, boys," said McMaster, seductively. "Have a drink, and then I'll tell you how you can make more money in an hour than you can make in a month or two guiding people through the cave."

McMaster drew a bottle from his pocket, and passed it to the guide who had first spoken.

"It's good stuff," he said. "I'll guarantee it, and you'll say so when you try it."

The fellow was nothing loath, and, taking the stopper out of the bottle, took a long swig, materially diminishing the contents. He breathed a great sigh of satisfaction as he lowered the bottle and passed it to his companion guide, and said:

"That is good stuff, shore enuff! Et's the best I've tasted this many a day. Try et, Sam. Et'll make ye feel less sore over losin' yer money."

"That's right," assented McMaster with a smile. "It'll make you forget your troubles."

The guide addressed as "Sam" eagerly took the bottle, and duplicated the performance of his companion, breathing a sigh of satisfaction when he had finished.

"Yer right, Bill," he assented. "Thet is all right stuff, an' no mistake. I feel a whole lot better."

McMaster and his friends took small drinks, as it was the plan of the scheming youth to get the guides well filled with liquor, when he felt it would be easier to deal with them. First, however, he wished to have them show himself and friends through the cave, so that on the mor-

row when he was to play the part of a guide he would know something about it.

"So, putting the bottle back in his pocket, McMaster said:

"We wish to be shown through the cave. We have been told that it is a great sight, and as we are men of wealth, in search of novelty and strange sights, we wish to see for ourselves if it is what it is cracked up to be."

"All right, sir," the guide called "Bill," said. "We will show you through at once. The price fur a party uv four or five is ten dollars."

McMaster drew a roll of bills from his pocket, and, selecting a ten-dollar note, handed it to the guide.

"There's your money," he said, "now lead the way to your great natural curiosity."

"Come on," said the guide, and taking up a lantern, which he lighted as they walked along, he led the way toward the cave entrance, which was only a short distance away. The other guide remained in the cottage, as one was all that was needed for the one party.

It is not our purpose to describe all that McMaster and his cronies saw in the Mammoth Cave. Suffice it to say that the sight was grander and more impressive than they had anticipated, and even the unimpressible natures of the youths were impressed somewhat. They were led along passages, all of which, McMaster learned by questioning, were marked so that anyone could follow the right ones, and they were shown the "Star Chamber," "Job's Coffin," "The Pulpit," etc., and were taken along under low roofs, in boats over little lakes, and along winding rivers. It seemed a rather large task to think of trying to learn this at such short notice, but McMaster felt equal to the task, and by asking lots of questions he felt that he had gained sufficient knowledge to enable him to make the trip through the cave, all right. He watched everything closely, and picked out the point at which he would leave Ben Bright's crowd to their fate.

It took a couple of hours to go through the cave and get back, and when they had returned to the cave, McMaster produced the bottle again, and the guides took good long swigs and seemed to feel much better. McMaster was a good general, however, and he was not going to risk losing the chance which he coveted by being in too big a hurry, so he waited for the liquor to have some effect, and then treated the guides again.

This potation seemed to get the two fellows into just about the condition McMaster desired to have them in, and he decided to act. They were seated at the table, and addressing the two, McMaster said:

"Would you two like to make a nice little wad of money, and make it real easy?"

The guides leered at McMaster, and swayed unsteadily in their chairs.

"Would we?" "Bill" asked. "Jes' ye tell us how we kin do et, thet's all. We're out ter make the stuff, eh, Sam?"

"Ye bet w'ar!" coincided Sam.

"I'm glad to hear that. It proves that you are sensible fellows, and I knew you were the moment I laid eyes on you."

"Betcher sweet life we air!" declared Bill, with drunken pride.

"Thet's w'atever!" from Sam.

"Bu' wha' is't ye wa', ennyway, stranger? Wha' air we ter do, an' how much money is thar in et fur us?"

"I'll tell you what it is I want you to do," said McMaster, in a wheedling tone. "I and my friend here like novelty, and we are always on the lookout for a chance to do something out of the ordinary, and have a little fun on the side, and I have made up my mind that I would like to add another experience to the many strange ones I have had in the past."

"Wha' ye drivin' at, ennyway? Tell us jes' wha' y'wan', an' mebbey we kin make a deal, all ri'."

"I'll do so. What I wish to do is this. I wish to have it to say in the future, when I return to the East, that I once acted as a guide in the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky!"

There was an air of repressed excitement about McMaster, and he gazed into the faces of the guides eagerly. He almost trembled, but the fellows were so muddled that they noticed nothing of this. They seemed surprised, however, in a maudlin kind of way, and Bill asked:

"Wha' ye wa' ter do thet fur? Et ain't no fun ter guide people through thet old cave."

"Oh, it wouldn't be fun to have to do it, as you two do, and to have to do it over and over and over again, day after day, but to me, for just two or three days, it will be sport. What do you say?"

The men looked at McMaster stupidly. Evidently their senses were in such a condition that they could hardly understand the youth's reasoning, but they were not so dazed with drink but what they were in for making something, and Bill asked:

"Ye say, then, thet ye wa' ter take our places an' act as guides fur two or three days?"

"That is what I wish to do," McMaster assented.

"Bu' kin ye do 't?" Sam asked. "Ye'll git lost yerself."

"Oh, I think not. I watched closely when we went through, awhile ago, and I am confident that I can go clear through and back out again without any trouble."

"He kin do 't all ri'," said Bill. "I showed 'im the marks, an' all he'll hev ter do's ter foller them."

"Tha's so. Well, how mush money is thar in it fur us, stranger?"

"Ye'll hev ter pay purty well, ef we agree ter do thet," said Bill. "We run the resk uv losin' our jobs, ye know, ef ther boss wuz ter gi' onter et."

"I'll make it worth your while," said McMaster. "I don't ask you to do this for nothing."

"How mush ye giv' us?" from Bill.

"I'll tell you what I will do," said McMaster, impressively, "if you will go away and leave us here to act as guides in your place for three days, I will give you one hundred dollars apiece."

"Wha'!"

"A hundred dollars apeece!"

"Yes, one hundred dollars apiece. What do you say?"

The two men looked at each other with owlish gravity.

"Will we doit, Bill?"

"Will we? I think we will!" decidedly. Then Bill looked at McMaster doubtfully.

"Ye meens this heer?" he asked. "Ye hain't jes' a-stringin' uv us, air ye?"

For answer McMaster drew a roll of bills from his pocket, and counted out two piles of one hundred dollars each and pushed them across the table.

"There is the hundred for each of you," he said, quietly. "You see it for yourselves. There can be no further doubt. Money talks, you know."

"Tha's wha' et does!" assented Bill, grabbing his pile with eager fingers.

"Ye bet yer life. We b'leeve ye meen et now, an' we'll go ye ef we lose!" cried Sam, likewise grasping his hundred dollars.

"You accept my proposition, then?"

"Ye bet."

"Shore!"

"And when will you go away?"

"Ri' away, stranger. We'll go down ter Hanover, an' hev a high ole time with this heer money!"

"All right, that is the talk. How far is it to Hanover?"

"Fo' miles."

"How will you get there?"

"Walk."

And the two quickly made preparations to leave, evidently glad of the chance to get away.

"Remember, now, that you are not to come back until three days have passed," said McMaster, as the two were starting. "I have paid for my fun, and I wish to have it."

"I don't want you fellows to come popping in here to-morrow or next day."

"Ye needn' be afrai', ole hoss," said Bill. "We won't be back till the three days is up—an' mebbby not then."

"Tha's ri'!" coincided Sam, and the two set out, leaving McMaster and his crowd in possession.

McMaster was delighted at the success of his scheme, so far.

"I tell you, fellows, this is the finest scheme yet!" he cried. "I get not only Ben Bright, but his entire gang as well, and they are so dead stuck on him that I hate them all nearly as badly as I do him."

"But do you think you can work it, McMaster?" asked Wilson. "Aren't you afraid they will tumble to the fact that we are in disguise?"

"I don't think they will detect this fact," said McMaster. "One thing in our favor is that they would never dream of such a thing as that the guides for the Mammoth Cave should be McMaster and his friends. They won't be expecting anything of that kind, and will not be likely to tumble to it."

"That's so, but are we all to be here when they come, to-morrow?"

"No, only two of us. You see, they will have drivers along who will doubtless know that only two guides stay here, and Wheeler and I will remain while the rest go back to the wayside house where we left our rig, and wait for us to join you there, when we will return to Glencoe."

"Shall we go back there this evening?"

"No, that is not necessary. You can stay here to-night, and it won't be quite so lonesome for Wheeler and me. That crowd won't reach here before ten o'clock to-morrow."

"How are you going to work the trick of leaving them behind, in the cave, and yet get away yourself, McMaster? I don't see how you can do it."

"I will do it this way: Do you remember that last little lake that we crossed in the boat?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am going to take them across that, and get them to looking around, and then when no one is noticing I will turn the light in my lantern out and slip back to the boat, get in and row back across, leaving them in the darkness on the other side, with no means of getting across the lake, or pool."

"You'll have to work it pretty slick, old man, or some of those Ben Bright fellows will tumble to you too quickly, and block your game."

"I'll risk it," declared McMaster, confidently. "I can work it, all right, for they won't be expecting anything of

the kind, and it will be an easy matter to catch them off their guard."

CHAPTER VII.

THE RIDE TO THE MAMMOTH CAVE.

"All aboard for the Mammoth Cave!"

In response to these words, which were shouted upstairs in a stentorian voice, Ben Bright and his entire company came trooping downstairs from the parlor of the hotel, and made their way out of the doors.

It was early morning. The sun was throwing up its first rays above the horizon to the eastward, and although the season was late fall time, the morning was balmy and pleasant even at this early hour, for it was down in Old Kentucky, where winter sets in very late indeed, and stays but a short time even then.

In front of the hotel were drawn up three surreys, fixed for the occasion so that the three would accommodate the nineteen people comprising Ben Bright's "Three Chums" Company and the three drivers.

It took some little time for all to get into the vehicles, and get comfortably fixed, but it was accomplished at last, and the drivers cracked their whips and away went the three heavily loaded vehicles at a goodly pace.

In the first surrey were Ben Bright, Dorothy Dare, Tom True, Mamie Blair, Stage manager Hinkle, Miss Small and Pinky Sweet, the latter occupying a position on the front seat with the driver. The rest of the members of the company had divided up to suit themselves, Little Punn, Blues Brown and Will Rhyme managing to get in the same rig, so that they could quarrel with one another.

Slowly the sun rose, and as its rays began to be seen and felt the spirits of all rose, and the occupants of the three vehicles began to talk, laugh and sing, by turns, as the spirit moved them.

"This is glorious!" exclaimed Dorothy Dare, her beautiful face aglow with the light of enthusiasm and happiness. "I never took a ride that I enjoyed as I am enjoying this one. Isn't it just splendid, though?"

"It is that!" coincided Ben. "Isn't it a beautiful day for this time of year?"

"Yes, indeed! It is going to be a perfect day."

"It isn't the 'perfect day' that is making you enjoy this ride so greatly," said Mamie Blair, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"What, then?" asked Dorothy, innocently.

"It's where you are sitting!" laughed Mamie, and Dorothy glanced at Ben, beside whom she was sitting and blushed prettily, while the rest all laughed, Ben joining, for he could enjoy a joke even though he was partly the one scored on.

"Oh, Mamie, you are the worst tease!" said Dorothy, shaking her finger at her friend. "I don't think you ought to say anything, for see where you are sitting!"

Mamie laughed lightly, while Tom True, who was seated beside the jolly girl, blushed furiously, for Tom, while the bravest fellow in the world, ordinarily, was sore afraid of girls.

"That's all right," laughed Mamie. "Tom and I are the best of friends, aren't we, Tom?"

"Yes, indeed," he replied.

"But we haven't got to the point where we can rave over sunrises yet," added Mamie, with a rippling laugh, and then Dorothy reached over and pulled her friend's hair!

Thus the conversation went on, and the driver kept the horses going at a good pace, for he had promised to take them to the Mammoth Cave by eleven o'clock, so that they could eat an early lunch and enter the cave at noon.

The driver kept his word, the three surreys reaching the Mammoth Cave at ten minutes to eleven, where all got out and made their way to the cottage, where they were greeted by two rather rough-looking men.

"Are you the guides who show people through the cave?" Ben asked.

"Yes, sir, we're the men, sir," one replied. "Do you wish to be shown through?"

"Yes, but first we wish to eat a lunch. We have several basketfuls of food in the surreys. Will you kindly bring them to the cottage? But, hold, have you a room where we can eat in comfort?"

"Yes, sir. There is a room adjoining this that was made for that purpose, sir. There is a long table, chairs and all that. We will take the baskets in there."

"Very well, do so," and then Ben led the way into the room, which, while showing that it was not often used, was apparently clean.

"I'm as hungry as a bear!" said Little Punn.

"You ought to get some cards printed with those words on and wear one around your neck all the time, Punny," said Brown. "You are always as 'hungry as a bear!'"

"Forbear!" murmured Rhyme, and Little Punn looked at the offending youth reproachfully.

"I didn't think that of you, Rhymesy," he said. "As if being a poet wasn't enough to answer for!"

The men entered just then, bearing the baskets, and Dorothy, Mamie and Lottie Small quickly spread table-

cloths on the table, and then placed the food along the centre, while plates, knives and forks were placed along the edge. When all was completed, the luncheon was attacked with vigor by all hands, the ride having made them hungry, and, laughing, talking and eating, they enjoyed themselves hugely, all unconscious of the terrible experience that was so near at hand, was so soon to be gone through with.

McMaster and Wheeler, the disguised youths, watched the happy company with angry eyes, and McMaster gritted his teeth whenever his eyes fell on Ben Bright.

"Go it!" he muttered. "Have your fun. Laugh! You won't have another chance soon. You'll soon be where you will laugh on the other side of your mouth!"

And Ben and his friends, utterly unconscious of their danger, kept up their merry chatter, and dwelt on the meal so long that McMaster and Wheeler became impatient. They did not say anything, however, as they made it a point to say as little as possible, anyway, for fear their voices might be recognized.

At last the lunch was ended, even Little Punn having had all he wanted, for once, and then the baskets were repacked by the girls, and McMaster and Wheeler took the baskets and replaced them in the surreys.

It was now twelve o'clock, and, addressing one of the guides, Ben asked:

"How long does it take to go through the cave?"

"Oh, from two and a half to three hours," was the reply.

"Are you ready to take us through now?"

The guide nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"What will it cost us?"

"Fifteen dollars."

Ben quickly counted out the money and handed it over, the guide pocketing it.

Then Ben turned to his companions.

"Is everybody ready to start?" he asked, looking from one to another in an inquiring manner.

Little Punn held up his hand.

"Did I understand him to say it took from two and a half to three hours to go through that cave?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ben.

"Then," said Little Punn, "you can count me out. I don't believe, on second thought, that I care to hide away from the outer world quite so long as all that."

"Oh, come, now, Punny, don't back out at the last moment!" said Rhyme.

"It's to keep from having to back out that I am refusing to start in," said the little fellow. "You must really ex-

cuse me. I forgot to have my life insured, and I cannot afford to take the chances. I'll stay out here and watch the drivers to see that they won't eat up all our grub."

"I'll wager that you'll have the most of it eaten yourself before we come back," growled Brown.

"Say, I believe that I'll stay and keep Punny company," said Rhyme. "I never was much of an explorer, anyway."

"Sensible boy!" said Little Punn.

"Well, since some are going to stay out, I think I shall keep them company," said Black, who had expressed himself as being rather afraid in the first place.

"I guess I'll stay behind, too," said Kerr. "I forgot to bring my curiosity with me, this morning, and I can stay out with a very good grace."

"These people certainly do know a good example when they see it," said Little Punn, proudly. "I tell you, it takes Little Punn to set the pace."

There was a few moments of silence, during which time Ben Bright gazed about at the members of the company, and then he said:

"Are there any more who wish to withdraw?"

No one responded, and Ben continued:

"I do not blame any one for refusing to enter the cave, if they feel timid about it. I would not wish to influence any one to enter the cave against his wishes. As for myself, I really am desirous of seeing the interior of this famous cave, and I am looking forward to this event with pleasure. It may be that some of the rest think and feel differently, however, and if so, speak up. Don't go into the cave unless you really wish to do so."

There was silence for some moments, and then Hinkle spoke up:

"I guess the rest of us are desirous of making the venture, Mr. Bright," he said. "You might as well make the start."

"Very well, then. Gentlemen," to the guides, "lead on, we will follow."

"Just as soon as we get our lanterns," was the reply, and the two pseudo guides went into the cottage, returning presently, carrying lighted lanterns, and slyly licking their lips. Evidently they had gotten something else besides the lanterns while in the cottage.

"This way," said McMaster in as disguised a voice as it was possible for him to make it. "Follow us."

Then they led the way toward the entrance to the cave. Reaching it, they entered and the party followed. Ben and Dorothy were at the rear, and as they entered the portals of the cave Dorothy turned pale, clutched Ben by the arm, and uttered a little exclamation of terror.

"What is it, Dorothy, dear?" Ben asked, taking the girl's hand in his, and pressing it reassuringly.

"Oh, Ben," the girl whispered, tremblingly; "I feel so afraid. I am impressed with the feeling that something is going to happen to us—something dreadful. Oh, I wish we had not come!"

Ben Bright was startled. He was beginning to believe that there was something peculiar about Dorothy, that she was able to foretell impending danger. This had been demonstrated on more than one occasion, and the youth was impressed more now than he would have cared to admit even to himself. It would be impossible to withdraw now, however, so he gave the girl's hand a reassuring squeeze, and said:

"It is the gloomy look of the cave that has impressed you unfavorably, Dorothy. Nothing can hurt us, I am confident. Dismiss the fears from your mind. Forget it, little—sweetheart!"

Ben whispered the last word, but even this, while it caused the beautiful girl to give Ben's hand an answering gentle squeeze, did not drive the troubled, almost frightened, look from her face and eyes.

"I—I am afraid, Ben!" she whispered.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE CAVE.

Down into and along the winding galleries of the Mammoth Cave went the party, led by the pseudo guides, McMaster and Wheeler, who, by going very slowly, and feeling their way, as it were, taking time to search for the marks, were enabled to lead the way correctly, and avoid creating suspicion that they were not what they professed to be—with one exception. The exception was Tom True.

What caused Tom to become suspicious that all was not right he could not have told himself. It happened that he was in the front rank of the little party, and was right at the heels of the guides, and something about their actions caused him to become suspicious. They seemed to be undecided at times which way to go, and would hold the lanterns down and search around, looking at the corners of the great rocks where passages led off in different directions, and they hesitated enough so that Tom became suspicious, though what he suspected he could not have told. In fact, he did not exactly suspect anything, he was simply suspicious on general principles, for it was his nature. He made up his mind to watch the fellows, however, and to that

and kept right at their heels and watched their movements and did his best to overhear every word spoken by them to each other.

In Tom's mind a dimly defined suspicion that the guides might be members of a band of robbers, and that they would lead Ben's party to some point in the cave and rob them, took shape, and he was on his guard. He said nothing to Ben, or any one, but took it upon himself to watch closely and defeat the men's project, if any such they had.

The rest of the members of the party were watching the sights of the underground region with eager eyes. They saw nothing suspicious in the actions of the guides, for the reason that they had eyes only for the great natural curiosities to be seen. Slowly the party made its way along, and one after another the curiosities were seen and commented upon. The thing which pleased all most, perhaps, was the "Star Chamber," where after standing and looking steadily for a few moments, the stars in the heavens above could be seen, the same as at night, there being an opening in the roof of the cave, through which they looked. This is a peculiar phenomenon, but one familiar to men who are much down in deep wells, from the bottom of which the stars are visible even on the brightest day.

Then "Job's Coffin" was viewed and commented on, and the "Pulpit," a natural formation resembling a pulpit, from which Henry Ward Beecher once delivered a sermon to a party of friends who were viewing the cave.

Then a miniature river was reached, and the party had to take to boats, of which there were two, and both boats were pretty well filled. The roof of the cave here came down so low that in places the people in the boats had to stoop down to keep their heads from striking. And then the guide in the boat Ben and Dorothy were in said:

"If you want to hear an echo that is an echo, some one yell."

"Spalding, you try your hand—or your voice, rather," said Ben. "You have a splendid pair of lungs."

"All right," said the young giant, good-naturedly, "here goes!" And then he cried out, as loudly as he could:

"Hello! Hello!"

Instantly the echoes started out, seeming to go away gradually into the distance, rolling and tumbling over each other, and then presently here they came back again, still rolling and tumbling, and getting louder and louder, until finally they roared in the ears of the people in the boats like thunder claps! It was wonderful—almost terrifying, and the girls stuck their fingers into their ears to shut out the sounds.

"Wonderful!" cried Ben, when the sounds had finally died out. "That beats anything I ever heard in my life!

I would not have believed such a thing possible if I had not heard it with my own ears."

"There is nothing in the echo line to excel it in the whole world," the guide said. McMaster did not know anything about it, but that was what the real guide had told him the day before, and so he repeated it.

This was the longest speech McMaster had made since the arrival of Ben Bright's party at the cave, and Tom True, who sat near the bow of the boat, and close to the speaker, started. There was something strangely familiar in the sound of the guide's voice, Tom thought.

"Where have I heard that voice before?" the youth asked himself. "I've heard it before, I am sure of it, for remembering voices is one of my accomplishments. I am not much at remembering names or faces, but once I hear a voice I can as a rule tell the voice if I hear it again. I should say that the fellow is trying to disguise his voice, and if that is the case, it is all the more likely that my suspicions of these fellows being members of a band of robbers are not unfounded. I shall watch them more closely than ever."

"How deep is this water, guide?" asked Hinkle.

Now that was something McMaster did not know, but he could pretend to, which in this case would amount to the same thing, so he answered, promptly:

"It is not known, sir. Bottom has never been found, although soundings have been made a number of times."

"Goodness! What if the boat should upset!" exclaimed Dorothy. "We should all be drowned!"

"Oh, no," smiled Ben. "There are enough of us who could swim to save those who could not. It does not matter how deep water is, after it becomes more than six feet. A thousand feet deep is no worse than six, as one cannot stand on the bottom and keep head above water that is six feet in depth. One would have to swim, which is all one would have to do where the water has no known bottom."

"That is true, Ben, but it seems much more terrifying to know that the water is so deep."

"Don't think of it, then, Dorothy," said Ben. "Forget it."

"I should certainly drown," said Hinkle, "for I cannot swim a stroke."

"There is not the slightest danger of the boat upsetting," said Ben. "The water is still, and the boat could hardly upset if it wanted to."

"There is no danger," the guide assented.

Presently the end of the little river was reached, and the party debarked and made its way along the passageways, the boats having been pulled up on the sand, so that there would be no danger of their floating away.

Soon the shore of a little lake, or big pool, was reached, and the party had to take to boats again, there being two there, as in the case of the river. The lake was only about a hundred yards across, and when about half the distance had been traversed the guides stopped the boats and McMaster said:

"There are hooks, lines and bait in the boat, and in this lake are eyeless fish. If any of you wish to do so, you can bait some hooks and throw them out and catch some of these fish."

"Eyeless fish!" exclaimed Markham. "Do you really mean that the fish have no eyes?"

"Certainly," replied McMaster. "The fish are blind as bats. It is dark in here always, save when we come with our lanterns, and the fish have no need of eyes. If you don't believe me, throw out a line."

"But how do the fish bite, if they can't see the bait?" asked Spalding.

"They smell it, I guess. That is the way we size it up, and that is what scientific men have said."

"Well, that is curious, sure enough!" said Hinkle. "I have read of this, however."

"So have I," coincided Ben. "I had forgotten it, however, until it was recalled to my mind, just now."

"It was the same in my case."

"Give me a hook and line, guide," said Ben. "I wish to have it to say that I have caught eyeless fish in the Mammoth Cave. Bait the hook for me, too, please."

And McMaster did as asked, although it galled him to have to bait a hook for his hated enemy. He had only himself to blame, however, as if he had not mentioned the matter of the fish, none of the members of Ben's party would have thought of it. McMaster consoled himself with the thought that he would soon have a chance to square all accounts with Ben, though, and he baited the hook and passed it down to Ben, who threw it into the water. Soon he got a bite, and pulling in, found he had a beautiful fish, almost perfectly white in color. The fish weighed about a pound, and had no sign of eyes in its head.

"Oh, I wish to catch one, too!" cried Dorothy, and Ben took the fish off the hook, rearranged the bait, and Dorothy tried her luck. It was not a minute before she had caught a fish almost exactly the same size of the one caught by Ben, and then Mamie wished to try. She soon caught a fish, and one after another the different members of the party caught a fish, those in the other boat being in the same pursuit, and soon all had caught a fish, which was all they came for, and then they were ready to proceed.

Irkedly chafing at the delay, McMaster had sat there, waiting, and when all had finished, he took the one with

alacrity, and pulled on across to the opposite shore, where all hastened to land, as they were tired, from sitting so long in the cramped confines of the boat.

And now, at last, the place was reached which this persistent young villain had settled upon as being the best point at which to put his plan in operation, and to this end he pulled his boat up onto the sand only a little ways, so that he could leap into it and push off quickly if necessary, and Wheeler, who had been posted, of course, did not get out of his boat at all, but kept his seat. These little points were noticed by Tom True, and he wondered what it meant. Being naturally suspicious, he turned the matter over and over in his mind, and he wondered if it might not be the scheme of the two to leave himself and friends there in the cave, and return with a force and rob them. Why this thought occurred to him, Tom could not have told, but it did, and he made up his mind to watch the guide closely.

To this end he kept right at the fellow's heels, and when they had gone only a few steps, after leaving the boat, he saw the guide reach down and catch hold of the little wheel with which the wick of the lantern is turned up and down. The next instant the light in the lantern went out like a flash, and like a flash, also, Tom realized what had happened. The guide had turned the wick down, purposely extinguishing the light!

Instantly Tom reached into his vest-pocket and drew forth a match. He felt that he must act quickly, if he were to succeed in checkmating the guide's move. Then Tom True struck the match.

"He is trying to get away and leave us here!" he cried.

Instantly the pseudo guide drew a revolver, but quick as a flash Ben Bright seized the fellow's wrists in a grip of iron.

"Not so fast, you scoundrel!" he cried.

Cries of astonishment escaped the male members of the party, while cries of fear fell from the lips of the girls.

"What does it mean?"

"Why is this?"

"What did he want to do that for?"

"This is a strange affair!"

"He's up to some game, Ben!" cried Tom. "I know it. I've been watching him and the other fellow all the time. I believe they are fakes. I——"

At this moment the match went out, plunging the cave in blackest darkness, and at the same moment, having summoned all his strength for the effort, McMaster, who was almost wild with anger at having been seized before he could escape from among the crowd after extinguishing the light in his lantern, gave a terrible, wrenching jerk, and taking Ben by surprise, at his attention had been partly

on his chum, Tom, managed to free himself, and leap away. Evidently the scoundrel had kept the location of the boat well in mind, for he reached it unerringly at two leaps, and at the third leap was in it, the force of his body striking in the boat, driving it off the sand and out into the lake a dozen feet.

Ben Bright had leaped after the fellow as quickly as possible, but missed getting his hands on him by a hair's-breadth, and when Tom True lighted a second match and held it up so as to throw some light on the scene, the two boats, with the triumphant pseudo guides seated in them, rowing with all their might, were out in the middle of the lake!

"Good-by!" cried McMaster. "Good-by! I leave you to continue the exploration of the cave alone and in the darkness. I have just received a telegraphic message that my presence is needed outside, and I had to go in a hurry. Adieu! We will return next week sometime—nit!"

Cries of dismay and anger escaped the members of Ben's party, and Tom True grated in Ben's ear:

"Haven't you a revolver, Ben? If you have, shoot that fellow full of holes!"

"No, I have no weapon, Tom," replied Ben. "I could not hit him, anyway in this semi-darkness, and I wouldn't wish to kill the fellow, anyway, as perhaps they are only playing a joke on us."

"Don't you believe it is a joke!" cried Tom. "They are villains, up to some terrible scheme of deviltry, of which we are to be the victims. Killing by a bullet would be too easy a death for them."

Just then Tom's match went out, and before he could strike another there came a wildly triumphant voice from the other shore of the lake, crying:

"Hello, there, Ben Bright! Would you like to know to whom you owe your present predicament? Then you shall know! I am Frank McMaster, your enemy, from whose vengeance you have escaped several times before, but from which I do not think you will succeed in escaping this time! You and your friends are doomed, for I have hired the regular guides to go away and stay several days, and none of your friends on the outside know the way to find you where you now are! You will all die of starvation, and I am glad of it, for I hate you all, the whole kit and cargo! Good-by! Adieu! Farewell—a long farewell! Ta-ta! I wish I could witness your sufferings, as you are undergoing the pangs of starvation amid the darkness of this horrible place, but as I cannot, I shall have to content myself with seeing them in my imagination. Again, and for the last time, farewell! Ha-ha-ha!"

Then the party standing there, gazing across toward

where the mocking voice came from, saw a light spring into life, showing the forms of two men. They had lighted their lantern, and immediately they walked away, being lost to sight around an outjutting corner of the passage along which they were moving a few moments later.

Ben Bright's party was left in the depths of the Mammoth Cave, without a light, and with two waterways to cross and no boats to cross in. And even if they were to get across these waterways, they had no knowledge of the correct route to traverse to reach the outer world. They were in a terrible predicament, were threatened by terrible danger—death by starvation!

They were lost in the Mammoth Cave!

CHAPTER IX.

LOST IN THE MAMMOTH CAVE.

So overcome with horror at the predicament in which they were placed were the members of Ben Bright's company that for a few moments they stood silent, watching where the light had disappeared, and then they uttered exclamations.

"This is horrible!"

"It is terrible!"

"Perfectly awful!"

"What are we to do?"

"What can we do?"

"Nothing!"

"It looks that way. The only thing possible to do is to stay right here and wait, in the hope that the guides may return and find us before we are dead from hunger."

"Things seem dark just now, friends," said Ben Bright, in as hopeful a tone as he could command, "but it may not be so bad as it seems. We may be able to escape."

"But how?" asked Tom True. "That is the question."

"And it is a hard question," said Ben. "It is a question which just at present I am unable to answer. But while there is life there is hope, and I am far from feeling like giving up."

"I wish I had your nature," sighed Hinkle. "I must confess that it looks to me as if we were doomed."

"It is too early to despair yet," said Ben. "We will have a try at saving our lives first."

"But what can you do, Ben?" asked Dorothy, in a voice which was full of unshed tears. Somehow she felt that if there was a loophole of escape, Ben would find it.

"Well, for one thing," said Ben, in a voice of quiet de-

termination, "I can swim across this pool and come back in one of the boats and ferry you all over."

"Oh, you must not try it!" cried Dorothy. "The water is as cold as ice, and you would be drowned!"

"That would not help us much, anyway, Ben," said Spalding. "There is that river, which is nearly a quarter of a mile in length to traverse, and the boats are at the wrong end of that for us."

"Couldn't we drag one of these boats to the river?" asked Ben.

"We might, but I doubt it, as I am sure we should lose our way. We would never find the right passages in the darkness."

"We could try," said Ben, grimly.

"Yes, and that is all the good it would do us," said Tom True in a voice of despair. "Ben, it is no use. We are in for it, and might as well face the situation first as last."

"But I never give up till I have to," said Ben. "I cannot be content to sit down and wait for the approach of death. That is contrary to my nature. If I must die, I want it to be while I am making an effort to save my life."

"That is very well," said Mamie Blair, "but what if in trying to find our way out of here we should wander away off into some unexplored portion of the cave, where, even if the guides should return and enter the cave, they would be unable to find us? That would not be doing something to save our lives, but rather to lose our lives. It seems to me that it would be wiser to stay here and trust to being found by the guides."

"I don't know about that, Mamie," said Ben. "I believe that I could find my way out of here, if we could overcome the obstacles of the lake and river."

"It is barely possible that you might do so, Ben," said Dorothy, "but the chances are a thousand to one that you could not do it."

"I would try, at any rate, if I got the chance," said Ben, and then he said:

"Come with me over here a ways, Tom; I wish to have a talk with you."

"Ben," said Dorothy, in a voice of sudden fear; "don't—please don't try to swim across that terrible pool!"

"Don't worry, little chum," Ben replied. "I am not going to do anything rash."

Nevertheless Ben had made up his mind to swim across the pool and bring a boat back with him, and he communicated this fact to Tom when they had moved a few paces away in the darkness.

"But, Ben, you can't swim across," protested Tom, in a low tone. "The water is as cold as ice, and you will get

cramps before you are halfway across. Don't try it, old man."

"I am not the least afraid of cramps, Tom," half-whispered Ben. "I have been swimming in water but little removed from freezing temperature more than once, and never had any trouble. I can do it, and I must do it. I could not bear to sit quietly down and wait for the fate that McMaster thinks is to be mine, and ours. I must defeat that fellow, Tom. I cannot, will not, let him get the better of me in this manner."

"But you will freeze afterward with wet clothes on," protested Tom.

"No. I am going to take my clothes off down to my underwear, Tom, and then when I come back I can doff the underwear and don my dry clothes. You go back to where the rest are, and I will go along the shore of this pool to the wall which is fifty yards distant, and swim across from there. When I come back with the boat I will leave it close to where you folks are, and you can row one load across while I am donning my clothes again."

"All right," said Tom. "But I would rather you would not risk it, Ben."

"I am not the least afraid but what I can do the trick safely, Tom," said Ben. "So don't be afraid."

Then Ben made his way along the shore of the pool to the wall of stone, fifty yards or more distant, and quickly doffed his outer clothing and entered the pool, while Tom returned to where the rest were standing.

Ben entered the water slowly, accustoming himself to the cold gradually, and presently he was in up to his neck, and the water, while very cold, did not inconvenience him much. He now struck out for the other shore boldly, and he was halfway across when he heard Dorothy cry out in sudden alarm:

"Ben! Oh, Ben!"

"All right, little chum!" he called back cheerily. "Don't be frightened. I am more than halfway across, and will make it all right."

It was not the most pleasant task in the world this that Ben was engaged in. Swimming in almost ice-cold water, in utter darkness, in a cave far beneath the surface of the earth, and with not a perfect knowledge of the surroundings, was not sport by any means, but Ben felt that he must try to effect the escape of himself and friends from this horrible place, and he would have attempted a much more difficult and dangerous thing than this.

A few moments later the voice of Tom True was heard, asking:

"Still all right, old man?"

"Still all right, Tom," Ben replied, "and I must be nearly across now."

A few more strokes, and Ben felt bottom beneath his feet, and a few moments later he stepped out of the water onto the sandy shore, and began feeling his way along in search of the boats. These he found not twenty yards from where he had landed, and he cried, out, joyfully:

"All right! I'm across, and have found the boats. I will be back with one in a few moments."

A cheer came to him from across the pool, the voices of all being mingled in the cheer.

The boats had been pulled up pretty well out of the water, but Ben was very strong, and managed to work one down into the water, then, getting in and seizing the oars, which had been left in the oar-locks, he rowed across the pool as straight toward where his friends were as he could go.

When he was nearing the shore, he called to Tom, and the youth came to the shore at the spot where, judging from the sound of Ben's oars, he would land.

Presently the bow of the boat touched, and Ben leaped ashore, and, leaving Tom to pull the boat up a ways, ran along the shore to where he had left his clothes, and, quickly doffing the wet underwear, slipped into his outer clothing. He was chilled to the bone, but soon became warm again, and rejoined Tom at the boat by the time the first load were in the boat.

"Will you row this load across, or shall I?" asked Ben, and Tom replied:

"I'll do it, Ben. You must be tired."

"All right; are you ready, now?"

"Yes."

"All right," and then Ben gave the boat a push, forcing it off the sand and out into the water.

"Oh, Ben, I'm so glad you got across safely!" said a voice almost at Ben's ear, and he exclaimed:

"Is that you, Dorothy?"

"Yes, Ben."

"Oh, I knew I could do it, Dorothy, or I should not have risked it," said Ben. "I am glad I did, too, as now we can get across the pool, and, if we can find our way to the river, which I think probable, as it is not far, we can make a good start toward getting out of this place."

"I hope we shall be able to do so, Ben, but I am afraid that we shall get lost."

Just then a shout from across the pool announced that the boat had reached the other shore in safety, and five minutes later Tom was back with the boat, and the rest of the members of the party got into the boat, Ben being the last to enter.

"Are all in?" he asked.

"All in, I think, Mr. Bright," replied Hinkle.

"All right, then, here we go," and Ben pushed the boat off.

Tom rowed, and by listening to the voices of those on the other shore, had no difficulty in striking it at the right spot. Then all debarked, and Ben and Tom pulled the boat up out of the water.

"Now, boys, I am going to call on you to help," said Ben.

"All right; what is it you want us to do, Ben?" cried Spalding.

"This: A couple of you get on each side of the boat, a couple more behind, Tom and I will go in front, and we must drag the boat to the river. I am confident I can find the way, as it is only a little ways."

The boys hastened to do as told, there being some little confusion as they bumped together in the darkness, but presently all were in position, and Ben said:

"Now, everybody keep close behind us, so that we may not become separated. All ready, boys?"

"Ready," came back the reply.

"Good, then pull, everybody—excepting you two at the rear, who will please push."

"Here we go," said Tom, and then slowly the boys began pulling the boat along on the sandy bottom of the cove.

It was pretty hard work, even for so many hands, for the boat was quite heavy, but the youths persevered, and as Ben stopped every few feet, anyway, to feel around and take his bearings, as it were, they had plenty of opportunity to rest.

This was kept up for nearly half an hour, so far as they could guess as to the flight of time, and all were beginning to fear that Ben had gone wrong, when suddenly he uttered an exclamation of joy.

"Here we are!" he cried. "Here's the river! I thought I had not gone wrong."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Dorothy.

"Good enough!"

"Glad to hear that!"

"That is good luck!"

"That is good news, indeed."

All were delighted, and a few moments later the boat was pushed into the water of the little stream. The boat would hold only a portion of the crowd, and as in the first instance, when crossing the pool, part of the company got in, and then, cautioning all to stay right where they were, and not wander away, Ben took the oars and rowed up the stream, Tom sitting in the bow and fending it away from the rock walls, and instructing the occupants of the boat

when to duck to keep their heads from striking the low roof.

It was slow work, but perhaps twenty minutes later the prow of the boat grated on the sand, and it was found that they had reached the end of the river, where it disappeared under the rocks and went no one knew whither. Ben knew he had reached the right spot, for he found the two boats there, which proved this, conclusively.

Tom leaped ashore, and held the prow of the boat steady while the rest got out, and then he got back in again, and Ben rowed back to the other end, and those who had been left behind got into the boat, and were rowed to where their companions were, at the opposite end of the little stream.

Then all got out, and Ben took an oar and pried the seats out of the boats. It happened that the seats were pine boards, and Ben had a pocket knife with a good strong blade in it, and he went to work and whittled a lot of shavings and split off some splinters. These he made up into some little bunches, and striking a match lighted one of the bunches, and soon had a very respectable little torch, which gave enough light so that he could see to work, and then he went to work and split the three boards up into splinters, using one of the oars to pound the knife-blade down with.

"There," he said, when this was accomplished, "now we can have a torch all the time, and I think we shall be able to escape from this place after all."

"Well, you are certainly the most determined, never-say-die sort of a fellow that ever I saw!" said Hinkle, admiringly. "You have more nerve than anybody."

"Oh, I don't know," smiled Ben. "Maybe I am more afraid of the darkness of this place than the rest of you, hence am more desirous of getting out."

"You couldn't be more desirous of getting out than I am," said Hinkle.

"I guess that remark can be echoed by every one of us," said Dorothy. "But do you really think you can find your way out of here, Ben, even with the aid of the torches?"

"I think so, Dorothy. I hope so, anyway, and I am going to make the effort right away."

"Well, I guess all are ready to follow where you may lead, Ben."

"That's what we are!"

"That's a fact."

"Sure thing."

"Yes, lead on, Ben. We will follow."

"Very well," said Ben. "Two or three of you boys carry the splinter, and I will go in front."

Tom, Spalding and Marham gathered up the splinters, and then Ben said, "All ready? Come on," and he set out along the passage leading away into the darkness.

Ben moved very slowly, for he remembered that it was a long way to the entrance, and that there were hundreds of passages leading off at various angles, any one of which, if taken, would take them out of their right course and result in their being hopelessly lost in the labyrinths of the cave. It would be better to take plenty of time, and feel his way.

Onward he moved, slowly, and behind him came the other members of the party. As fast as one splinter burned down, another was lighted, and while the primitive torch did not give much light, it was far and away better than no light at all, and all felt much better and more hopeful than they had done while groping in the dark, as they had been forced to do at first.

Onward, slowly and cautiously, Ben moved, the rest at his heels. Very few words were uttered by any of the members of the party, for all felt that it was important that nothing should distract Ben's mind from the task upon which it was at work. One little moment of forgetfulness or carelessness would be sufficient to cause the wrong passage to be taken and result in their being lost.

So onward they moved in almost absolute silence, and splinter after splinter was burned. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon. The party had been in the cave four hours. It seemed even longer to them.

Onward Ben led the way, and another hour passed. The splinters were getting scarce, and unless the entrance was reached before another hour passed the splinters would all be burned and the party would be again left in darkness. Fearful that this might happen, Ben moved faster, but to no avail, for half an hour, three-quarters, a full hour passed and still the entrance was not in sight. And what was worse, Ben had been forced, much against his will, to come to the conclusion that he was lost!

Yes, although he had not hinted the fact even to Tom, Ben was certain that he had, at some point away back, taken the wrong passage, with the result that now they were in some unknown and unexplored portion of the cave—lost!

Ben said nothing, however, but, compressing his lips, continued onward, determined to keep on going as long as they had a light to enable them to see.

But that was the trouble, the last splinter was reached, finally, and when it was about half burned out Ben suddenly found himself in a circular cavern about forty feet in diameter, with no exit anywhere save at the point where

they had come in. It was a regular cul-de-sac, and Ben paused and looked around at his companions in dismay.

"This settles it, my friends," he said in a sober tone. "I have missed my way, there is no doubt about it. We saw nothing like this as we went in. I thought I could lead the way to the entrance, but I have failed, and now we are undoubtedly lost in the Mammoth Cave!"

All gazed at Ben, and then around the cavern in horrified silence. They had hoped that Ben would succeed in finding the way out, but now that hope was dashed to the ground.

"We can go no further," Ben continued, "for, see, this is the last splinter. When it burns out, which will be in a few minutes, we will be in total darkness again, and it would be folly to try to do in the darkness what I have failed to do when we had light."

"Then you think there is no hope for us, Mr. Bright?" asked Hinkle, in a husky voice.

"I fear there is very little, if any, Mr. Hinkle," replied Ben, gravely. "Our only chance is that the real guides may return and enter the cave and search until they find us. Our own friends on the outside, Little Punn, Rhyme and the others, would get lost themselves if they were to attempt it."

"So they would. It looks as if we were doomed."

Hinkle spoke in a despairing voice, and there was a look of utter despair on the face of every one, unless it might be Ben, and even his face was more sober than any one present had ever seen it. In truth, Ben felt a feeling of despair tugging at his own heartstrings, but for the sake of the rest he would not let it show in his face. He was determined to keep up a bold front till the splinter burned out, and his face would be hid by the darkness.

Ben had stuck the end of the splinter in the sand, and all at his suggestion seated themselves on stones, of which there were many scattered about on the floor of the cavern.

"We might as well take it as easy as possible," he said.

All watched the splinter as it burned lower and lower, and, when at last it had almost burned to the floor, Ben rose to his feet, and, looking around at each of his friends in turn, said:

"Friends, it looks now as if we are doomed to die in this place, but there is one chance for us—one thing which we have not tried. I am not a church member, but I have always heard that there is great efficacy in prayer, and in this our hour of great need I am going to try to pray. Will you join me?"

"Gladly!" said Hinkle, and he set the example by getting on his knees, an example which was speedily followed by all present, Ben kneeling as soon as the rest had done

so, and then in a broken, halting manner, for Ben had never tried to pray in public, although having uttered many an unspoken prayer, he offered up a prayer which was evidently sincere, and when it was ended, all felt as if a load had been lifted from their minds. True, they did not expect that Ben's prayer would receive a practical answer, that they would be rescued from their perilous position on account of the prayer, but they felt that something had been done that was sadly in need of being done, and all felt relieved and thankful to Ben for having thought of it.

It was a peculiar fact that their fate was accepted by all with almost perfect calmness. There was no wringing of hands, no outcries or lamentations, even from the girls. They looked pale, of course, and there were unshed tears in their eyes, but they gave no outward expressions of terror.

And now all eyes were turned to the burning splinter, the blaze being now at the sand. It was beginning to splutter and flicker, and would soon die out—then darkness would reign.

"Flicker-flicker!" went the blaze, and then as it was dying out, the eyes of Ben and Dorothy met in one last eager gaze. The face of each was indelibly impressed upon the mind of the other in that brief glance, and then the light went out! Only a few sparks remained, and even these soon died out. The little party was in total darkness.

Then there was perfect silence. No one spoke a word. They seemed dazed, stupefied with despair. Ben and Dorothy sat side by side on a stone, and, reaching over, Ben took the girl's hands in his own, and pressed them gently and reassuringly, in an attempt to give her courage. Thus they sat, for quite a while, and then Ben felt teardrops on his hands. They were from the eyes of Dorothy, from the eyes of his little chum—his little sweetheart—and instantly a strange feeling took possession of the youth. Involuntarily he did that which he had never thought of doing before—he gently disengaged his right hand, and slipping his arm around the yielding form of the beautiful girl he drew her up close, and then, placing his left hand under the girl's chin, gently raised it, and then before he knew what he was doing he had kissed the tears away from Dorothy's eyes, and next his lips met hers in a long, clinging kiss that thrilled him through and through. And Dorothy? Evidently she was not displeased, for she nestled closer to Ben and made no effort to evade him. There were two happy persons in that cave, at that moment, in spite of the fact that death was staring them in the face.

Then, with Dorothy's head on his shoulder, his cheek against her velvety one, they sat in silence, thinking of each other, and consequently still happy. Thus they sat,

for hours, it seemed, when suddenly Tom True, who was sitting nearest to the entrance to the cavern, suddenly exclaimed:

"I thought I heard a voice calling!"

All listened eagerly, hoping against hope that Tom had not been fooled, and presently a faint "Hello!" was heard, coming to their hearing faintly, as if it had traveled miles.

Exclamations of delight escaped all, and Ben said:

"It is somebody searching for us! We may be saved yet! Everybody yell 'Help!' at the same time. Ready: Help!"

All shouted the word together, and as soon as the echoes had ceased reverberating, all listened eagerly, and the cry was heard again:

"Hello!"

It seemed closer this time, and Ben and the rest answered again and listened as before.

Soon the cry was heard, and it sounded closer, all thought, and they hastened to answer. This was kept up for half an hour, the voice of the stranger, whoever he might be, coming gradually closer and closer, and finally it was close enough so that its owner said:

"Where are you?"

"We are in a circular cavern, from which there is only one passage leading," replied Ben at the top of his voice.

"All right; stay right where you are. I know where it is," came back the voice.

"We will do so," replied Ben, then, addressing his friends, he said:

"Friends, we are saved! And as a little while ago we prayed for God's mercy, let us now thank Him for His mercy."

Then Ben uttered a short prayer that was, while broken and halting, heartfelt and sincere, and all said "Amen!"

Ten minutes later a man bearing a lantern appeared at the entrance to the cavern, and behind him were Little Punn, Rhyme, Kerr and Black. "Here they are!" cried Little Punn. "Good! Hurrah! Hurrah! You are saved, folks, and I, Little Punn, helped to save you, don't forget that!"

All had leaped up as the man appeared with the lantern, and Ben stepped forward and said:

"Stranger, no one of us who are here ever saw a more welcome sight than that of you, with your lantern! We have wandered here in this cave for hours, and had settled ourselves down here to die. We hardly dared hope that we would be found."

"I, in company with your friends, heer, set out ter search fur you ez soon as I reached the cave, which wuz et about six o'clock," the man said.

"Are you one of the regular guides?" asked Ben.

"I am," was the reply.

"And were you hired to go away and leave some men here to act as guides in your place?"

"Yes, sir. Ther feller give us a hundred dollars apeece, an' said he on'y wanted to hev et to say that he had acted as a guide in the Mammoth Cave. I b'leeved 'im, an' didn't think uv gittin' ennybuddy into trouble."

"He said you would not return until after three days had passed," said Ben.

"Who were the fellows, anyway, Ben? And what became of them?" asked Little Punn.

"One was McMaster," Ben replied, "and I suppose the other was Alford, Wheeler, or some one at least of the four cronies of his."

"Great Scott! That fellow again?" cried Little Punn.

"Wuz he an enemy uv your'n?" the guide asked.

"The worst enemy I have in the world," was the reply.

"Well, well! An' thet wuz the reason he wuz willin' to giv' us so much money to go away. He wanted to play this trick on you."

"That was it, and if you had not come back when you did, we should have suffered terribly, perhaps have perished from hunger and exposure."

"Waal, I'm mighty glad I got back," the guide said, earnestly. "He'd never a got me ter do w'at he did ef he hadn't a got me drunk first."

"So that's the way he worked it, was it?"

"Et wuz, sir, an' ez soon ez I got sober ag'in, I come back."

"For which I am extremely thankful. Well, lead us out of this as quickly as possible, for we are sick of the Mammoth Cave. We have seen all of it that we wish to."

"I never want to hear it mentioned again!" This from Mamie.

Dorothy said nothing. There was a peculiar look in the eyes of the beautiful girl. Now that they were to get out in safety, one would have almost imagined that she did not regret the experience. And, to tell the truth, she did not, nor did Ben.

The guide now led the way, and all followed, Little Punn talking at a great rate, for he was really delighted to have had anything to do toward rescuing his friends from their perilous position.

It took nearly half an hour to reach the entrance to the cave, and when at last the little party stood out in the fresh air, under the star-studded heavens, each and every one drew in a long breath of the pure, life-giving ozone and felt like shouting with delight.

They were saved! Again had McMaster's carefully ex-

cooked scheme of revenge on Ben Bright and on Ben Bright's friends, gone astray.

All made their way to the cottage, and on the way Ben asked Little Punn and the rest if they had not seen McMaster and his friends, the pseudo guides, come out of the cave. Little Punn said they had not. Undoubtedly the two had watched their opportunity and slipped out, and had made all haste to get out of that part of the country.

"I'm as hungry as a bear!" said Ben, when they reached the cottage. "We must not think of starting on our return to Glencoe until after we have eaten something. There is plenty of food in the baskets."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Blues Brown. "Remember, Little Punn has been out here all the afternoon!"

"I never ate a thing the whole afternoon," said Little Punn, "and I'm as hungry as two bears!"

The guide, on being requested to do so by Ben, brought in the baskets, and the girls put the food on the table, as at dinner, and all ate heartily, for their experience had made them very hungry. Then it was late, being now seven o'clock.

When the meal was ended, the baskets were replaced in the surreys, the drivers were ordered to hitch the horses to

the vehicles, and all got ready to start on the return to Glencoe.

"Wun word, sir," said the guide to Ben, "w'at'll be done ter me fur this heer happenin'?"

"So far as I am concerned, nothing," replied Ben. "You redeemed yourself by coming back and rescuing us. I will add, however, that if I were you I would drink no more liquor."

"I'll never drink another drop so long's I live!" the fellow said earnestly. "Thank ye, sir, fur your kindness. Ye e'u'd lose me my job by sayin' the word."

"But in consideration of what you did in the end I shall not say the word," said Ben.

Then all got into the vehicles, and with a backward look and a shudder the start was made for Glencoe. They had seen all they wished to see of the Mammoth Cave!

THE END.

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✧ PRAISE! ✧

Lowell, Mass., Dec. 4, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—From what I have seen and heard "Three Chums" is a very nice book. Did you ever hear of such people as Ben Bright, Tom True and Dorothy Dare? They are regular chums. I would buy one of the books, only I have no money. Will you please send me a sample copy? My address is 124 Appleton street, Lowell, Mass. As I have no more to say, I will close. Arthur R. Willey.

P. S.—Please send it as soon as you can.

We trust that you will soon be able to judge of "Three Chums" for yourself and not by hearsay, although you have heard quite correctly.

New York, Dec. 5, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I wish to congratulate you on securing such a good writer as Mr. Moore, for as a writer he beats everything around. I take every week a number of novels, but "Three Chums" beats all. I wish you would write in a later edition something about Ben, Tom and Dorothy crossing to Europe and taking in that continent. I also hope that Heber Markham will become a fast friend of Ben's. But Mr. Moore knows what is best, and so I will close, remaining your ever constant reader, William H. Luisheimer.

The author will consider your suggestions. He has several things up his sleeve, and if you will continue to read "Three Chums," you will learn all about them.

Sacramento, Cal., Dec. 7, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—My opinion of "Three Chums" is that it is the boss book for interesting stories, and the boss book among all others. Mike Field, 914 D st.

Thanks for flattering opinion, tersely expressed. We trust that you will never have occasion to alter it.

Kirkville, Mo., Dec. 7, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I see you will publish opinions as to the "Three Chums," so I will give you mine. I think the novels the best of their kind published. They have good morals and are written by a competent author. I have read Nos. 3 and 4, and several other novels of the same grade, but I consider "Three Chums" above all the others. Long live Ben Bright, Dorothy Dare and Tom True, and all of Ben's friends. I wish this publication will never be discontinued. Write a line, boys, and show your spirit toward "Three Chums." I get the novel every Wednesday as regular as it comes, from our popular newsdealer. I remain, yours very truly, Ed S. Carter.

We are always glad to publish such opinions, and trust that the boys will take your advice and send in just as flattering ones.

Jamestown, N. Y., Dec. 26, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I received your catalogue some time ago. I like "Three Chums" the best. I am taking it of my newsdealer. I thank you just the same. I didn't get time to write so I do so now. What is the matter with "Happy Days?" I take that of my newsdealer. Yours truly, Robert H. Grace.

We are glad that you like "Three Chums." There is nothing the matter with "Happy Days," as you have probably discovered before now.

Lawrence, Mass., Dec. 8, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—In regard to your publication, "Three Chums," I desire to state that it is my opinion that the same is all right. I would be pleased to hear from any reader of "Three Chums." Yours respectfully, Eugene Kelley, 359 Broadway.

Your opinion is that of thousands, but we are just as well pleased.

Allegheny, Pa., Dec. 9, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I drop you a few lines to let you know my opinion of "Three Chums." I have read about three hundred novels, and I am a good judge of them. I think "Three Chums" is all right, for I have read all that are published. I like to read about Ben Bright, Tom True and Dorothy Dare, but Dorothy Dare does not come into the reading often enough. I thank Harry Moore for writing such a nice story. I cannot praise it enough. I think Tom and Ben are all that is true and manly. All the boys around here in Allegheny are reading "Three Chums," and say it is all right and a good story. As a descriptive writer Harry Moore would be hard to beat. "Three Chums" is an interesting weekly, and is good reading for old and young. Ben Bright is an ideal character for youth.

The above is unsigned, but we return thanks to our unknown correspondent for his good opinion, and trust that we may never forfeit it.

Chicago, Ill., Dec. 13, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—Having read the "Three Chums" from No. 1 to the present date, I will venture to express my opinion of it. I can safely say that it is the finest weekly published. It is both interesting and instructive, and it gives me great pleasure to be able to recommend it, not only to boys and girls, but also to their parents. I have read so many novels of all kinds that I have earned the sobriquet of the "Novel King," and though I assure you I am not at all proud of it, my experience ought to enable me to know a good book when I see it. My parents allow me to read the "Three Chums" without the least hesitation. I congratulate Mr. Moore on his successful work. A long life to the "Three Chums."

It is quite an inspiration

To express appreciation

Of this wondrous publication,

As some readers do in rhyme.

I am nothing of a poet,

And am willing you should know it.

As to praise, then I will show it

Here in prose some other time.

A constant reader, Carl Schule.

Certainly, with your experience, you ought to know a good thing when you see it, and your opinion is therefore worthy of consideration.

Youngstown, O., Dec. 16, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I am a reader of "Three Chums," and think it is the best paper of its kind issued. I think Ben Bright ought to have had McMaster expelled and punished, but I am glad Tom True and the others rode him and Cogswell on a fence rail. I have read every number up to date, and am anxiously waiting for the next number. Yours truly, Roswell Hood, 233 Arlington st.

It is not always wise to take revenge, and we think you will find that Ben acted for the best. Follow his fortunes and see.

Chelsea, Mass., Dec. 22, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read every number of "Three Chums" that has been published and I am patiently waiting for the next. I think it is the best weekly in the country. I wish Mr. Moore the best of success in his great work. A constant reader, J. H. S.

Your patience will be rewarded, for each number of "Three Chums" is better than the preceding. Mr. Moore returns thanks.

New York, Dec. 27, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—Inclosed find five two-cent stamps, for which please send me by return mail Nos. 6 and 7 of "Three Chums," which so far has been the finest story book I have ever read. Hoping they will continue to be as good as they have started, I remain, T. W. Banks, 148 Liberty st.

Thanks. Your hopes will certainly be realized.

Somerville, Mass., Dec. 26, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" from No. 1 to date. "Three Chums" are all right and I hope they will keep on with the good work. Ben Bright is a good model to go by. I think Dorothy is a peach. Tom is true, indeed. I hope Ben will knock Frank McMaster's head off. Yours truly, Daniel Manning, 10 Nassau st.

Thanks for approval of the "Chums." Ben may not do exactly as you wish, but he is sure to triumph in the end.

Providence, R. I., Dec. 20, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—We have read all of "Three Chums" and will say there is no novel can beat it. Ben is all right and cannot be beaten in anything. I don't think I know any book as good as "Three Chums." Best wishes to Mr. Moore. Yours, Claffin Reading Club. Frank Ginnes, President; E. McLaughlin, Secretary; W. Mahony, Treasurer; W. Morrison, Porter.

We are pleased that the club likes "Three Chums" and hope it will be always found upon your tables. Mr. Moore returns best wishes.

Frostburg, Md., Dec. 6, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I am a constant reader of the "Three Chums," and I notice that you ask for opinions of the book. I get it every week, and I find it to be the equal of any. I am now stopping in Frostburg, Md., but my home is in Baltimore, and I hope to find "Three Chums" in the stores when I get back there. I am very much interested in your books. I am, yours sincerely, J. F. Strassberger, 1044 Haford ave, Baltimore.

Yes, you will find "Three Chums" in Baltimore, and wherever you go, in fact, as the boys and girls all over the country are greatly interested in them.

Berlin, N. H., Dec. 24, 1899.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" from No. 1 up to date and think they are all right and I am very glad that Ben Bright got the upper hand of Frank McMaster. I hope Mr. Moore will keep on writing "Three Chums." Yours truly, Delmer Dunn.

Thanks. Mr. Moore intends to do so and we trust that you will continue to be pleased with his work.

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